

With What Strength Remains



A Stranger Things Fanfic

With What Strength Remains by PillowSlave

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Drama, Romance

Language: English

Characters: J. Hopper, OC

Pairings: J. Hopper/OC

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-05-11 13:28:42

Updated: 2017-07-24 10:05:13

Packaged: 2019-12-17 15:31:28

Rating: T

Chapters: 13

Words: 38,328

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: How does a man like Chief Jim Hopper plan on spending his Christmas day off after everything he went through in connection with the Byers incident? Easy: couch, beer, TV. But when he comes across a broken down car on his way home from work and meets the attractive but quirky owner, Hopper finds his plans suddenly changed.

1. THE MOTORIST

"You can head home now, Chief."

Jim Hopper looked up from the paperwork he was filling out on his desk, a half-smoked cigarette dangling precariously between his lips. Officer Jones stood in the Chief's office doorway, his eyebrows raised and waiting for his superior's response. He had started his shift nearly twenty minutes ago, but Hopper hadn't budged from his seat.

It was the same at every Christmas. And Thanksgiving. And Halloween. Usually the station had to fight to get Hopper *into* work. Big family holidays and other occasional days that were significant to the Chief, however, posed the opposite problem; getting him to leave work. But Jones couldn't blame the man for that given what he, and everyone else he worked with, knew about his past.

He watched as Hopper plucked the smoking stem from his mouth and stubbed it out in the filled ashtray on his desk.

"Alright, alright. I just gotta finish this report and I'll be on my way."

"You should probably finish it when you come back in on Monday. The snow is starting to pick up out there. Don't wanna be caught in that mess." And before Hopper could reply, Jones moved away from the door and headed to his own desk leaving Hopper to stare at the empty space with a disgruntled look. The man wasn't that much older than Hopper, but he occasionally felt the need to talk to him like he was his father, an impulse no doubt born from the fact that Jones had been working at the station for nearly twenty years without making more than sergeant and Hopper arrived back from the city four years ago as the department's new chief in one swift move.

Hopper gave a quick glance over his shoulder out his office window and noted the swirling gusts of white specks under the streetlights of downtown Hawkins, Indiana. The weatherman was right after all: it was going to be quite the white Christmas.

He grimaced.

Ignoring the biting urge to light up another Camel, buckle down and just go ahead and finish the stupid report, he puffed a heavy sigh and pushed back from his desk, shrugging on his winter coat. He grabbed his hat from where he had tossed it hours earlier, snapped off the lamp and headed out of his office, locking the door behind him. As he passed through the reception area, he called out to Jones,

"Try not to fall asleep again," before forcing himself out into the progressing winter storm.

He didn't see Jones roll his eyes, but he knew it happened just the same.

The drive from the police station down Route 421 out to his single wide mobile home normally took approximately twenty minutes, in both directions. If he was running late for work, he could make it in about ten. Tonight, he hazarded an ETA of thirty five minutes the way visibility was running and also on account of the road conditions which meant he could be drinking his first beer in sixteen hours not long after midnight.

He would be enormously mistaken.

His favorite stretch on the way home was the last four miles where the roadway passed through large areas of farmland and then finished with densely wooded scenery that coughed him up, eventually, onto his property on Loon Pond. His fellow officers liked this same bit of asphalt because there were a couple of good hiding spots they could set speed traps on unsuspecting drivers passing through or the occasional carload of energetic and overly confident youth. But tonight Route 421 swallowed Hopper's Blazer in a whirling, muffled tunnel of steady snowfall that kept his wipers beating rhythmically and his pace slow and cautious.

Even at his glacial clip, he didn't see the stopped car until he was nearly on top of it.

Slamming on his break pedal, Hopper swerved to his left, uttering curse words that would've made his mother cringe, but avoiding the heap of snow-covered metal. His Chevy gave a small slide before stopping, where then he turned around in his seat to look back at the

vehicle sitting darkly off to the side of the road.

Pressing his lips into a thin line, Hopper turned on his police flashers.

"Jones this is Hopper. I've got a vehicle on the side of the road, looks disabled. I'm gonna go check it out, please stand by," he called in on the truck radio before reaching down into his glove compartment for his flashlight. Swinging open his door he pressed his hat firmly down on his head as the wind blew a gust of cold flakes into his face. Raising the beam of light towards the car, he began his approach slowly, squinting through the possessed flurry of snow, trying to detect a form inside the cab.

The car was covered in about two inches of drift, the windows collecting a pattern of undulating lines making it difficult for him to see inside. Wiping clear the driver's side window, Hopper cast his light into the front seats and found the car empty.

Well, empty of passengers.

The entire rear of it was packed tight with several large suitcases, jammed cardboard boxes, and engorged trash bags.

Unstrapping his hand-held, Hopper walked towards the rear of the vehicle, dusted off the license plate and said over the airwaves as he crouched down into a squat,

"Jones, Hopper again. Do you copy?"

An unnecessary amount of seconds passed before the staticky voice of dispatch finally replied,

"Uh, yeah, Chief, Jones here. I copy."

"Are you awake enough to run a license plate for me?"

"Go ahead," came Jones' clipped reply.

"Florida plate. X-ray, uniform, bravo, seven, eight, seven. It's a dark green Datsun."

Jones repeated the information back before going silent to check on

the car and plate. As he waited for dispatch to return, Hopper took a look around the wagon and noticed a pair of tracks in the untouched snow on the right side of the vehicle. They were heading into the woods.

A familiar sensation clamped down in his stomach pumping adrenaline into his system. Swallowing the prickling feeling, he cupped his hands around his mouth, bellowing an echoing 'Hello?' towards the grave and silent trees. He waited a beat and then repeated the call, louder. When he heard nothing in response, he buckled his radio back on his belt and unholstered his firearm.

A strange noise suddenly murmured in among the woods, one he couldn't place and wondered if he had misheard, it was so slight. Bringing his flashlight up under his gun and them both up to eye level, Hopper stepped out of the road and guardedly traced the tracks up to the tree line. He paused, his breath caught in his throat, trying to listen to the forest over the hammering of his heart. He lit up the path as far as his light could reach, but the footprints veered off over a small rise.

The woods seemed to sense his hesitation, perhaps smelling the fear that began to stand out in beads of sweat on his face, dampening his shirt. It was easy for him now to hear every creak and scrape of a tree branch, every loaded clump of snow hitting the ground like a soggy body bag. And was there another sound, too, coming from just beyond that hill?

"Hello?!" he hollered as he steadied the flashlight on the crest, taking a few more tentative steps deeper into the brackish copse. "This is the police! Anybody there?!"

A movement flashed in the corner of his eye. He wheeled to his right, his weapon kept steady in the point shooting position, as he felt his lungs expand with a large intake of air. His light caught a black figure lumbering stiffly towards him. A figure with no face.

Ice water coursed through his veins as the breath left his body.

The Byers monster.

In another second, Hopper would have squeezed the trigger to his revolver sending a bullet careening through the Christmas blizzard to meet the creature's undefined head. But a voice wafted out to him on the rippling currents of snow.

"Hello! Hello, I'm here!"

And it lifted its thick arms over its head in a signaling wave as it continued its clumsy approach through the trees, a pathetic dribble of light bobbing in front of it from some inadequate source.

Hopper dropped a number of expletives as he slouched over, the relief sending the blood to his head too quickly, making stars appear in his vision. Leaning against an obliging tree for support, he put his gun back in its holster, keeping his hand on its grip, as the person drew closer. His body, meanwhile, did its best to catch its breath and quiet its thundering heart. When they made it to a comfortable speaking distance, they began,

"Oh, I'm so glad-"

"What is wrong with you?! Do you realize how close you got to getting shot?! I could've killed you! Why didn't you answer me when I called out?!" Hopper's voice erupted over them.

Somewhere hidden in the folds of black fabric the voice responded,

"I was peeing." Then a shrug and, "Sorry."

Hopper blinked rapidly. He lifted the shaft of light to the figure's face but found it completely swathed in a dark woolen ski mask, scarf, and deeply recessed into the hood of the men's snowsuit they wore. He could barely make out a pair of eyes staring back at him through the material and ski goggles they were shielded under. Roving the beam over their form, he noticed that the snowsuit was too big for them, the sleeve cuffs hiding any hands and the pant legs bunched up at the top of their boots. He narrowed his eyes. He opened his mouth to ask if they were alone, but Jones' tinny voice split through the air cutting him off,

"Chief, nothing comes up on that car. Do you need any back up or" -

Hopper began pulling out his radio to respond- "should I see if Murphy's will send out a tow?"

"Oh, not a tow, I don't think," the form interjected, "I'm hoping I only need a jump. I have cables... I think."

Hopper so badly wanted to hand the mess over to Murphy's, letting someone else deal with getting this... he guessed teenage girl... squared away somehow. But it was late and it was Christmas and he was already here and, sadly, he had the cables.

With grudging resignation, Hopper depressed the 'Talk' button and answered,

"Naw, I'm good, Jones, thanks. I'll take care of it. Hopper out."

All he wanted was to be home on his couch having a beer and maybe watching TV. He had been so close to starting his time off from work it almost physically hurt him to think about it. Instead, he was trying to maneuver the jumper cables from his truck's healthy battery to the dead Datsun's in a raging snowstorm after working a double shift on Christmas Eve.

"What do you want me to do?!" the motorist asked over the wailing wind, the weather having decided that now would be a good time to get worse.

"Just get in your car and stay there! I'll let you know when to try to start it up!" Hopper said, trying to keep his voice from being carried away by the noise of the rushing air. He thought he saw the hood move as if in a nod of agreement before the bundled up form shifted toward their car door. But then it stopped and turned back to him, one of its padded arms extending out as they hollered,

"I'm Anne, by the way! Anne Garrett!"

Hopper realized she was offering a handshake, her gloved fingers barely reaching past her sleeve. He accepted her hand quickly and without warmth, the pressing matter of getting her on her way at the forefront of his focus.

"Jim Hopper!"

One pump and he was back to attending the cables, leaving Anne Garrett to get into her vehicle and wait for his further instructions.

After securing the clips, Hopper climbed into the cab of his truck and started the engine. He took the moment to have a cigarette as he waited for his car to juice her battery. Heat from his exertion over the last twenty minutes made him unzip his suddenly stifling winter coat as the windows began fogging up around him. He knocked down the fan on his heater.

He waited the few interminable minutes before figuring he'd given it enough time and clambered out of the Chevy. Raising his arm against the frozen moisture pelting him, Hopper made it to the Datsun and knocked on her snow-encrusted window. When she had the glass lowered enough he made a motion with his hand to indicate turning the ignition key. Another hooded nod and he watched as she gave the car a crank. Nothing happened.

Swearing, Hopper checked the clamps, verifying they were all firmly attached to their proper places.

"Try it again for me!" he yelled from in front of the dead engine.

The motor remained silent.

His face soured.

His night was about to get a lot longer.

Murphy's wasn't answering their phone and Joe's Garage over in Newburg wouldn't be able to get out there for another couple of hours due to an accident on Interstate 65 they were helping clear.

So reported Jones over the truck's radio.

Hopper and Ms. Garrett were sitting in the Blazer trying to thaw out while he asked dispatch to attempt to find a nearby towing company. During the time it was taking for Jones to call around, Hopper had plucked another cigarette from his thinning pack of smokes and impatiently lit up before scrutinizing the license and registration she had handed over to him when he asked for them back at her car. The face that looked up at him was of an attractive woman a few years

younger than himself with a steady gaze and hair pulled back into a pony tail. Her make-up, if she had any on, was light and natural.

"Mind pulling back your mask so I can make sure this is you?" he asked around the butt between his lips.

After finagling with her multiple coverings, she finally managed to reveal her face only, her expression the same as in the picture. Satisfied, Hopper nodded and handed her documentation back and watched her struggle to rewrap herself. She then scrunched forward towards the vents that were mildly blowing hot air into the cab, wrapping her arms tightly around her middle and began making those undecipherable noises with her mouth that people do when they're freezing. Without saying a word, he turned the fan on to a higher setting.

She tilted her head to him.

"Thanks."

"No reason you should freeze while we wait."

Obscured once more within the chunky layers of clothing, she presented a disconcerting image to Hopper that reminded him of his time spent inside the bulky hazmat suit when he and Joyce Byers went to look for her son in that hellish place the kids called the "Upside Down."

Since Will Byers had disappeared about a month ago, anything that sniffed of the unknown, the veiled, had no appeal for Hopper. So sitting next to a woman he couldn't see did not exactly sit well with him. Yet, he couldn't really say he felt threatened by her either.

Then again, that's probably how Benny felt before the undercover agent he let into his restaurant put a bullet into his skull.

Hopper pushed the memory of his friend's death scene from his mind, stretching his back to a straighter position as a scowl matted his features.

"So what's with the get up?" he asked unexpectedly. The enfolded head bobbed a glance down at their costume before seemingly

returning their gaze back to him.

"I just hate being cold," she said with a shift of her shoulders. It was a short answer and he was content with accepting it as is. His acknowledging nod, though, must've been too slight for her obstructed notice because she continued,

"I'm from Florida, so... Not used to this kind of weather. I mean, I knew it was going to be cold, but still... kind of a shock to my system, you know? I'm just glad I thought enough ahead to pick this snow gear up before leaving. I found it all at a thrift store in Groveland...that's where I'm from... Most of it was in the Men's section so it's...you know, too big. But I couldn't find anything in the Ladies' section. Not a lot of snow gear in Florida." She gave a fluttered chuckle. "So, yeah, it doesn't fit me well and it smells kind of gross, but it was super cheap and I knew I was going to need it up here, so... And, boy, did I ever need it. I mean, this" -she gestured a hidden hand towards the windshield- "this is crazy, right? My first experience with snow and it's a whopping blizzard. It's all so exciting! I mean, obviously I'm not thrilled with my car dying on me in the middle of nowhere late at night, but man, talk about an adventure. And it'll all turn out ok, I'm sure. We'll get a mechanic out here to give me a new battery and I'll be on my way again, no harm done. But lucky for me your showing up. It would've been a cold night in my car, that's for sure. But anyway, thanks. For stopping."

Hopper blew out the smoke he had been holding as she chattered away, his lungs finally relieved from the strain of keeping still. He kept his face as neutral as he had the strength for.

"Sure."

He then turned his face to his window, guillotining the exchange and focusing his eyes on his muggy reflection, praying that Jones would come back any second with the happy news that someone from Murphy's was already on their way.

So when Jones' voice finally did squelch over the speaker to inform him no tow truck could be had, Hopper was less than thrilled.

"No, no, you've done enough already, just let me-"

"I am not... leaving you here," he interrupted, his voice level.

"Look, I'll be fine. Snow's an insulator, right? I'll be toasty warm in no time... probably."

"I am not... leaving you here!"

"But where could you even take me? It's almost one in the morning on Christmas Day, everything's closed up or filled, I'm sure."

"There's a little motel over in Montauk, its usually got all kinds of vacancies."

Hopper had made use of their accommodations enough to know that to be true. What he didn't tell her was *why* there were usually all kinds of vacancies. He gave his head a small shake to clear out the grating signals of warning that sounded in his conscience. One night there wouldn't kill her, he reasoned with himself.

The pile of second-hand snow clothes in the seat next to him sighed.

"Alright, fine." And she opened her door.

"Hey! What're-"

"I'm getting my overnight bag. I'll just be a second." And she slid out of her seat, slamming the door closed after her. He watched her plod back to her Datsun to retrieve what seemed to Hopper an overly big overnight bag.

He barely waited for her to get back into his truck before throwing the gear into drive and setting off towards Sunnyside Motel in Montauk. Which was, of course, in the opposite direction of his couch and television set. He would be sure to honk as he passed the station just to wake Jones up.

"Look it, I'm really sorry about all of this."

"It's fine," he replied flatly.

There was a light exhale from her side of the cab. He watched in his peripheral as she crooked her elbow on the armrest of the door and

leaned her densely padded head against the cold glass of her window.

Her breath was creating a gray glaze where he imagined her mouth was hidden inside the cavern of her hood, steaming a light cloud across the transparent surface. Hopper ignored her for a few minutes, finishing his cigarette and stamping the butt out in the ashtray of the car. He was doing his best not to drive too quickly, the roads having gotten worse since his previous trip down them which now felt like ages ago. This entire time out he had only seen two plow trucks on the road.

She lifted her arm making him glance over and see her spell her name in the mist on the glass. A-N-N-E.

"Anne spelled with an E," her muted voice floated through the scarf wrapped around her face. She wasn't speaking to him necessarily, just voicing her thoughts.

"What?" Hopper seemed to mutter before he could stop himself. Somewhere in his cognizance a drum was struck, resonating something familiar to him, but couldn't quite place.

"Anne spelled with an E," she repeated, "It's from the book *Anne of Green Gables*. Anne Shirley asks her adoptive mother to call her Anne spelled with an E because she thought it looked more distinguished that way. It was my mother's favorite book; read it to us all the time. She named me after her. So whenever I spell it I always think of that part of the story and I end up saying it out loud. Funny, right?"

He didn't respond. Her words were fingers plucking the synapses of his memory and conjuring up an anamorphic image shadowed in pain. That had been the book he read with Sarah as she lay dying in the hospital, the last story he was to read with his baby girl and never get to finish.

His grip on the steering wheel constricted as he inhaled through his nose deeply, the well-known enflamed agony engulfing his chest. His vial of Tuinal lay snug against his leg in his pants pocket. Overriding his usual cautiousness when it came to taking a pill, Hopper dug for the plastic bottle like a man reaching for an itch he'd been waiting to scratch for too long a time. He dexterously opened and shook out a

single capsule, popping it swiftly into his mouth and swallowing it dry. As he casually stuck the container back into his trousers, he noticed the shrouded face observing him.

"Heartburn," he said, realizing it wasn't altogether a lie.

After ten minutes of silence between Hopper and Ms. Garrett, he wondered if she had fallen asleep. He was finding it difficult to keep awake himself, the long day at work catching up with him. He could feel the effects of the medication kicking in, too, relaxing him, easing the tension he had been feeling the last hour or so. Risking a glimpse at his passenger, Hopper surmised she was still awake.

"So. Ms. Garrett..."

"Anne."

"Anne," he corrected, "With an E." He heard a light flickering laugh in response.

"So, Anne. What, uh... brings you so far from home?"

He thought he heard her take in a grave breath.

"Well, Chief Hopper-"

"Jim... How'd you.. how'd you know I was the Chief?" he asked a little too quickly to sound anything less than paranoid. Which he was. But she didn't seem to catch the suspicion in his voice as she answered nonchalantly,

"That guy Jones called you Chief. And it says so on your badge. Anyway,...Jim,... it's a long story and you don't seem the long story type, so I'll just say *Life* brought me so far from home. Keep it short and sweet for you."

Was that...was that a jab?

He looked over at her, but of course he couldn't tell if she was trying to be funny or not because she was miles deep inside that mountain of fabric. Finally, he could only shrug his eyebrows and say,

"Fair enough."

There were a couple of beats before,

"Ever been?"

"Huh?"

"To Florida. Ever been?"

"Oh. Uh, no. No, never been. We almost made it there one year, but, uh...," *But then Sarah got sick...* "But Life. Right?" he finished with a lopsided grin, forcing the corners of his mouth to rise despite himself. Anne gave a humorless giggle of agreement.

"Yeah. Right. I've only ever been in Florida myself. This is my first trip anywhere."

"And you chose to come to Indiana?"

"Just passing through. I'm on my way to Michigan. The Upper Peninsula actually. I'm going to see my brother."

"Are you moving there?"

"Yeah. Well, no. I don't know. I've got some friends in Maine that I could go see once I'm done in Marquette. I might stay with them for a while, until I can get on my feet. Or I might just end up going back to Florida. I don't know. We'll see."

"Man," Hopper breathed. "Must be one heck of a story you're not telling me."

"Oh, it's epic," she said taking up his light-hearted thread and spinning it into a bigger, more playful yarn. "They're gonna make it into a movie after my book comes out. Meryl Streep is going to play me."

"Meryl Streep?" He caught himself thinking his passenger prettier than that.

"Yup, or else I won't sign off on the contract. I need a quality actress

to portray me, ya' know? I'd consider Dustin Hoffman dressed up as a woman again, but he's gotta work on his southern accent."

Hopper flat out laughed.

"I'd see it if Hoffman played you," he quipped.

"Oh, you'll see it anyway 'cause your character is gonna be in it now. This is all part of the story," and she gestured between the two of them.

"Aw, jeez. But who would you have play me?" He found himself actually curious to know who'd she pick. Curious and a little apprehensive.

"Hmmm," she brought her unseen hand to where he suspected her chin to be, "Maybe Burt Reynolds? He could pull off the grumpy-but-good-hearted cop pretty well, right? But he's not tall enough. Ooh! Clint Eastwood is tall and plays a pretty hot cop...except he's too old. Well, who would you suggest?"

"Uhhh..." His brain was still repeating 'pretty hot cop.' Did she mean she thought he was a pretty hot cop? Or just that Clint Eastwood looked pretty hot as a cop? "Maybe Burt Reynolds wearing platform boots?" he finally delivered. He reminded himself that she also said 'grumpy.'

But good-hearted, his brain fired back.

Shut up.

"Yeah, I guess that could work," she assented with a quick laugh.

"It's just too bad that he'll have such a small role in this 'epic' movie of yours."

"I know. And he won't be cheap either. Most of the budget will end up going to his paycheck, the greedy jerk. Oh, well. Them's the breaks."

Hopper felt the side of his mouth inch up.

She started rooting around in her overnight bag. His calm rattled as he watched her paw through her things, imagining all sorts of arsenal she could produce from the chasm of her sack. When she finally pulled out an orange, he unclenched his stomach with a gusting sigh.

"I've got several in here if you'd like one. Fresh from Florida," she offered as she began peeling the fruit, the air now being teased with the citrus tang of the rind.

"I'm good, thanks."

"I'm getting pretty sick of them myself. I've been eating them the whole way up. Does this motel you're taking me to have a continental breakfast by any chance?"

A fresh pang of guilt frayed his chest.

"Sorry, not that I know of."

"S'fine, was just wondering."

He listened to her chewing as she ate, a surprisingly non-abrasive sound, as the lull in conversation settled back in between them. Second thoughts about dropping her at the Sunnyside Motel began scratching away at Hopper's mind. It had been months since he made use of one of its rooms, but he didn't imagine it had gotten any better. But, he tried to reason with himself, she needed a place to stay and that seemed the best solution given the circumstances.

He just hoped someone other than Gary was working the check-in desk tonight.

2. MOTEL HELL

When Hopper finally pulled into the Sunnyside Motel parking lot, he felt his heart sink. There were a few cars parked, all heavily covered in snow, but the office looked dark. He left the Blazer running as he and Anne approached the door to reception.

It was locked.

He pounded on the wood anyway. *Somebody* had to be here, there were guests after all.

Anne stood quietly by, her bag clutched against her chest, shifting her weight from one foot to the other as they waited for a response from Hopper's knocking.

He assaulted the door again, louder and longer. He considered just breaking in, grabbing a key, and handing it over to her, calling it a night.

He tried one last time, yelling through the wind.

The light came on inside.

Hopper felt a rush of relief.

Unlocking noises were heard before the door was opened a crack, a grizzly strip of face appeared, the eyes at first angry, but once they recognized the man standing at the door, lifted in surprise.

"Gary, open up," Hopper said as he pushed the door in, forcing himself into the little reception office, Anne following quickly behind. The smell of alcohol, cigarette smoke, and neglect filled his nostrils. It was a closet of a space, only used for one thing: to give guests their key and take their money in exchange. A sickly light hanging from the stained ceiling cast enough of a glow to show Anne that this was a very far cry from a Holiday Inn.

"Hop! It's been a while, man," Gary began, but his attention was quickly arrested by the heavily clad image of Anne who stood just behind the Chief.

"You lookin' for a room, then," the oily clerk sneered as he headed behind the little strip of counter.

"No-yes... Not for us. For her," Hopper replied as he did his best to strangle the embarrassment from his voice. He lifted his hat off his head, nervously brushing the snow from the brim.

Gary paused.

"Just for her?"

Hopper leveled a menacing gaze at the man before stating a pointed, "Yes."

"Alright," Gary said defensively and he pulled out a small card and pen from somewhere below.

"If you could just step up here, honey," he said to Anne with a syrupy smile, "and fill this card out. The full-night rate is ten dollars, cash only. Hopper here only knows the hourly rates, isn't that right, Hop?" A dark look from Hopper only made Gary chuckle. "Oh, and I'll need to see your license, too, sweetheart."

"What for?" Hopper demanded before Anne could fish inside her bag for her wallet.

Gary put on an innocent look.

"She's a new customer, Hop, it's company policy. Now if she ain't old enough to rent a room, well..." and he made a move to take back the registration card Anne had started filling out.

"Alright, alright," Hopper muttered, giving an aggravated sigh.

Anne produced her license and a ten dollar bill, sliding them towards Gary.

"Is that what you look like underneath all them clothes you got on? 'Cause this is a real nice picture of you, Miss... Garrett. All the way from Florida, too! My, my, my. No wonder you're so bundled up. This must be real cold weather for you. Real cold. It's a shame you'll be staying in a room all by yourself."

"Just give her the key, Gary," Hopper broke in, his patience near the breaking point.

Gary flashed Hopper another gritty smile and Hopper felt something slither down his spine.

"Sure, Hop." He opened a drawer and pulled out a round yellow tag with a key hanging from it. It had 1A stamped in black over the plastic.

"Give her Room 8A," Hopper intervened. It was the room he liked to use when he went there because it was the least dingy and the furthest away from reception. He always imagined Gary had drilled a hole through the wall between room 1A and the office to spy on certain guests.

Gary's face clouded but he did as Hopper said.

The three of them took the walk along the front of the motel towards room 8A, Gary leading the way through the storm. Hopper didn't like that Gary had insisted on showing the girl to her room personally instead of just handing over the key. He didn't feel right leaving her alone with him so he clenched his jaw and decided to tag along for the big unveiling. They reached the last door and waited for him to unlock it, Hopper keeping himself between Anne and the unpleasant motel manager.

"Well, here it is," Gary remarked as he pushed in the door and hit the switch on the wall, illuminating the little room. Hopper and Anne scurried in from the weather. As Hopper looked around he wondered if the place had always looked and smelled this bad or if he just hadn't noticed it before. It wasn't *terrible*, he reasoned as he took in the cheap and dated furnishings, the fist-sized hole in the wall by the TV, and the unidentifiable stain in front of the bathroom door. Somewhere nearby a couple was yelling at each other or somebody was playing their television too loud.

Anne walked towards the bed and pulled back the mustard yellow blanket. Hopper and Gary watched her as she leaned over and took a sniff of the bedding. She straightened up and dropped her bag on the mattress, issuing a rusty squeak from the springs.

"Smells clean at least," she said as she pulled back her hood.

"Of course it's clean. Our maid Darla was here only a couple of days ago," Gary protested.

Hopper moved past him towards Anne and bent his head down as he asked in a low voice, "You sure this is okay? I can bring you somewhere else if this place grosses you out too much." He didn't know why he felt impelled to make such an offer seeing as that would've only kept him away from home that much longer. He chalked it up to the fact that he was feeling bad over being 'grumpy' to her initially. That and Gary was a major creep.

"Aw, thanks, Jim, that's really nice of you, but I'll be fine here. It's only for one night."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. And thanks again. You really saved me tonight."

He nodded his head a couple of times before retreating back to the door next to Gary.

"Listen, why don't you give the station a call in the morning. They can send someone out to pick you up and bring you back to your car. Hopefully it can get fixed early enough tomorrow so you can be on your way at a decent time. Okay?"

"Oh, I don't want to bother the police for a ride, I can call a cab or something."

"I could give you a ride if you needed one, sweetheart," Gary oozed, that slimy smile back on his glib face.

"No, no," Hopper refuted, his hand cutting the offer away. "Just call the station, okay?" The snowsuit shrugged as she bobbed her head in the affirmative. Gary extended his arm out, the room key dangling from his grimy fingers. Anne walked over and took them from him with a thank you. At that moment the couple who had been screaming at each other moments before were now making *other* loud and uncomfortable noises.

"I've got earplugs," she said as if answering the hesitation that Hopper was exuding. Hopper turned to Gary to discuss maybe setting her up in a different room that was further away from the recreating pair while Anne went and grabbed what looked like a toiletries bag from out of her sack and headed to the closed bathroom door.

"There's gotta be some other room available, Gary," Hopper was saying when Anne suddenly shrieked, jumping away from the now ajar bathroom doorway. She rushed back to Hopper's side and, gripping his coat sleeve, cried,

"There's somebody in there!"

Hopper was at the door, gun drawn, in three quick strides. Throwing the door open wide, he found a naked middle-aged man sitting on the toilet smoking a cigarette, a half-empty bottle of vodka on the floor between his feet. He looked up groggily at Hopper.

"I'll be out a minute," he slurred.

Gary appeared in the doorway.

"Donald! How'd you get in here, man?!"

"I gotta key," Donald replied like the answer was obvious.

Hopper put away his gun and pushed past Gary. He grabbed Anne's overnight bag from off the bed and walked briskly to where she stood.

"Give me the key."

She lifted her hand obediently and he snatched it away, half-turned, and tossed it back at Gary who now stood facing them. Donald could now be seen doing his best to stand up.

"Give her her money back, Gary. We'll be waiting in the truck." Taking a hold of her arm, Hopper steered Anne out of the motel room, not even bothering to close the door behind him.

If there hadn't been snow on the ground, the truck's tires would have screeched as Hopper peeled out of the Sunnyside parking lot. He

promised himself as they roared back towards Hawkins that he would never return there again. As the sign disappeared from his rearview mirror, Hopper gave a long sigh and lifted his foot off the accelerator. He looked over at Anne, back under her hood, who was looking at him.

She started laughing.

For several seconds he just sort of watched as she laughed, her torso slowly swaying in a circle, her handless arms crossing over her stomach or hitting the seat.

Then he started laughing.

"Can you believe it!" she wheezed, giving a snort which made her laugh harder. "I thought you were going to punch Gary!"

"I wanted to!"

"And the guy...just sitting there...on the toilet...like...What? I'll be out soon. Wait your turn." She could barely talk now and was gasping for breath. "Oh, my God, and your face! I thought for sure...when you pulled out your gun...someone was going to get shot!"

"I came close to it!"

Their hysterics lasted another few minutes until they both started coughing and sniffing. Anne pulled out some Kleenex from her bag and offered Hopper some which he gratefully accepted. As they blew their noses, Anne asked,

"So where to now, Chief?"

Hopper swore. He had kind of forgotten that she still needed a place to stay. The closest big hotel chain was in Cartersville, another thirty minutes away. He felt like he would never make it home tonight.

"Listen, why don't you just take me back to my car, okay? I've slept in it before and I'm certainly tired enough to do it again."

Hopper was shaking his head. He thought about how she had run to his side when she saw the drunk in the bathroom, the way she

clutched his arm. The cop in him reacted immediately to her fear, brandishing his gun, moving towards the threat to protect those around him, to protect *her*. Perhaps it was an age old instinct or a solid case of machoism, but it felt good when she fled to him, seeking safety in his presence. He was still feeling that impulse to look after her, so dropping her off at her car and calling it a night was out of the question. She'd be better off sleeping at the station or in his truck...

He frowned as a thought unfolded.

"I can't let you drive me all over creation looking for a place where I can stay," she argued.

"What if uh,... what if you just... I don't know... maybe stayed at my place?"

There was a stunned silence.

Then, "What?"

"Yeah, you could crash at my house for the night and then that way I can give you a ride back into Hawkins tomorrow and we could get a tow truck to come get your car."

He took her speechlessness as resistance.

"Look, Anne, I'm tired, okay? I worked a double shift today, we've been driving for close to an hour in this crap, I just wanna go home now. You don't seem like a crazy, psycho killer and I can't just leave you at your car and there's nowhere else I can think of to take you that isn't another hour's drive. So why don't you just let me take you home and sleep at my place. I mean, you were willing to stay at that dump back there. My place won't be in much better condition, but at least you won't have some scuzzy motel manager stalking you or find some naked guy in the bathroom."

"That...that seems a lot to ask of you, Jim."

"You're not asking. You'd actually be doing me the favor here."

There was a small pause.

"Okay," she said brightly.

Hopper felt a weight lift off his shoulders. Finally, he could go home!

"But just so we're clear, I actually *am* a crazy, psycho killer so... probably should lock your bedroom door while you sleep 'cause that's when I like to murder people."

"I'll be sure to sleep with my gun, too."

"Smart man."

3. ISN'T IT PRETTY TO THINK SO

When they drove past Anne's Datsun he noticed she had fallen asleep. Things had been quiet for the last fifteen minutes as both driver and passenger were feeling the effects of the long, strenuous night. She had slouched down in the seat, her head leaning against the bottom of the window on her hand. Her car was now well buried under the ever-mounting snow.

As he navigated the last few miles left to his mobile home, Hopper started worrying that he had made a bad call with having her stay the night at his place. He didn't know this girl from a hole in the wall. He could wake in the morning to find she had taken his TV and truck and gone to Mexico. Or she might burn the place down around them while he slept. Or what if she made up her mind to stay? Flashes of *Play Misty for Me* ran through Hopper's mind, increasing his blood-pressure.

Taking a deep breath, Hopper reminded himself that he was overreacting. He had dealt with monsters before, both human and otherwise, and had come out alive on the other side. Besides, his gut told him that she was just a normal girl trying to get herself to her brother's. A little rudderless, perhaps, but innocent enough.

When he finally pulled into his yard, Hopper almost groaned in relief. He put the truck in park and shut off the engine, casting a look at his still sleeping passenger. She seemed pretty knocked out and he decided to take the opportunity to go inside and maybe straighten the place up a bit before she saw it.

As quietly as he could, he climbed out of the Blazer and closed the door after him. Wading through the snow, he made it to his door and hurried with unlocking it. He hadn't used to keep his place locked, it was Hawkins after all. But ever since Brenner's men bugged the joint, Hopper was way more mindful about keeping his home secured when he wasn't there.

Once inside, he did a mad dash around the house, collecting the empty beer cans, emptying the ashtrays, removing his various articles of clothing that were lying around. When it looked a little more

presentable, Hopper headed back out to the truck to wake his guest.

Not wanting her to tumble out into the snow, he opened the driver's door instead.

"Hey. Anne. We're here."

She lifted her head, first looking out the window at his home and then over her shoulder at him, uncurling her cloaked limbs to stretch.

"Okay," she groaned and grabbed her bag from off the floor. Hopper hustled back around to the passenger side, taking her bag from her and closing the truck's door after she stepped out. He led the way back up to his now brightly lit home.

"I'm just gonna change the sheets on the bed real quick-"

"I'd rather sleep on the couch." She was already sitting down and untying her laced up boots.

"What? Are you sure?"

"Totally."

Hopper lifted his eyebrows, but let it go. He put her bag down beside the coffee table before removing his hat and hanging it on the coat tree by the door. Peeling off his coat, he headed to his bedroom, leaving Anne to get herself situated in the living room. He changed quickly into his casual clothes. He wasn't much for pajamas, opting to sleep in his shorts, but he was still craving that beer he promised himself hours ago and wasn't about to wander out there undressed.

He opened his door with the intention of calling out to her that he was about to leave his bedroom in case she was not altogether decent. But the small gap he gave himself to talk through showed a straight shot into the living room and his voice was arrested in his throat as his eyes caught on his guest who stood removing her bulky snowsuit and gear directly in his line of sight.

He was given a profile view of her as she leaned down to tug herself free from the mass of material, her hair, now liberated from the ski mask, shielding her face like a golden curtain. She stepped out of the

pants part and gave the discarded pile a kick, a casually dressed butterfly finally broken out of her black chrysalis. Sitting back down on the couch, she threw her length of hair back over her shoulder and gave Hopper his first real glimpse at what she looked like as she grabbed her overnight bag and rifled through its contents.

She was definitely prettier than Meryl Streep. But in a girl-next-door kind of way. Or rather *woman*-next-door, he thought to himself as he admired the way she filled out her simple red cotton blouse and fitted jean shorts, her skin that typical sun-kissed golden color of someone from a sunnier state. Her hair, though long, was lying flat and lifeless after having been stored in such tight, damp quarters for an extended period of time. He imagined it turning into a honey colored mane of thick wavy tendrils flowing down her back once it was cleaned and brushed.

Hopper frowned. That was enough of that.

He looked at the floor and pushed out of his bedroom, making a throat-clearing noise as he walked into the living room. She looked up as he came in and he noticed a light spray of freckles across her nose. Her eyes were a caramel brown. He grinned and said,

"Want something to drink?" as he headed into the kitchen area and pulled open the fridge.

"I'll have some water if it's not too much trouble."

After grabbing a beer for himself, he poured her a glass from the faucet.

"If you were gonna watch TV or something, don't mind me. I can sleep through anything," she said as she took her water from him.

"Oh, no I'm... I'll probably just go straight to bed. I'm pretty tired. But let me grab you a pillow and blankets first."

He found a clean sheet and comforter at the back of his linen closet and then gave her one of his own pillows with a fresh pillowcase on it.

"Need anything else?"

She had tossed the bedding onto the couch and picked up her toiletries bag and what looked like might be her sleeping attire.

"Bathroom? Minus the naked drunk guy as you promised."

He snickered and pointed it out to her. She smiled as she walked past him.

"Goodnight, Chief."

"Night."

Closing his bedroom door, he took a second to think, then turned the lock. He studied the knob as he took a swig of his beer.

He unlocked it, then headed to bed.

Falling asleep and staying asleep had become more difficult for Hopper since everything that had happened with the kids and that monster that Brenner's people cordially invited to Hawkins. Though never seeing the creature himself, he saw the world it lived in, pulled a slimy eel-like thing out of Will Byers' throat, and heard the description of what it looked like from the boys, Joyce, her son Jonathan, and Nancy Wheeler. He had nightmares often and always kept a lamp on in whatever room he was sleeping in, knowing that if ever that thing was nearby, the light would signal him. Both of these things, among others, contributed to his insomnia.

Tonight was no different. It was actually worse.

Because it was another Christmas without his family. Without Sarah.

His mind was playing back every Christmas he had spent with his daughter, trying to pick out the special moments that he had overlooked at the time, piecing them together into a collage of images. But he realized that every moment now was special, whether it was watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas* lying on the couch with her in his arms or her ripping the wrapping paper from her presents as quickly as she could.

Nights were always the worst for Hopper because his mind was constantly going back to the past and probing the jagged and tender

hole where his heart used to be. And all he could do was lay there and let it, praying for the booze and pills to kick in soon. And now with the nightmares, he couldn't even get any relief when he did finally get to sleep.

Usually he would've tried reading to perhaps coax himself into slumber and to keep his thoughts away from missing his daughter, but he had finished *The Sun Also Rises* the other night and hadn't been back yet to the store to get his next Hemingway. So he lay there on his back, his hands clasped behind his head as he stared at his ceiling, waiting for one nightmare to take the place of another.

As his body slowly gained consciousness, Hopper could swear he smelled bacon frying. He frowned. How could Diane be cooking bacon, he hadn't any in the house? Sarah must still be asleep, too-

And then his mind caught up and he remembered.

A miserable groan escaped his throat. He hated when his head played that trick on him. He rolled over sluggishly, not ready to quit his bed. He could hear the scrape of pans in the kitchen and the sound of someone -no, it must be Anne- walking around, opening and closing the refrigerator. Prying one eye open he checked his watch. It was close to ten. Rubbing a hand over the blue bracelet on his right wrist, Hopper sucked in a deep breath, unready to start another day.

But seriously, that couldn't be bacon.

After pulling on his Levi's and a flannel shirt, Hopper ambled out of his bedroom. She was standing in front of the oven holding a fork, her hand resting on her hip as she looked down at the frying bacon. She had on a long white t-shirt over a pair of grey sweatpants, her hair pulled up into a tight bun. She was wearing a pair of mismatched socks and he was struck with the thought that she was probably used to walking around barefoot.

"Good morning," she chirped with a smile when she noticed him standing there, "There's a fresh pot of coffee if you want some."

She was a morning person. Wonderful.

He stayed rooted in the living room. The blanket she used was neatly folded and sitting on the couch, the bare pillow resting on top of it. He then caught the sound of the washing machine running and he presumed that was where the pillowcase and sheet she used were.

"I could've sworn I didn't have any bacon in the house," he finally remarked as he watched her turn a piece over with the fork.

"Oh, you didn't. I had to go get some." She pulled another piece out of the pan and laid it on a paper towel covered plate.

"You...went to the store?"

"No, the store was closed. I went to the station and met Jones and asked him if there were any places in town or nearby that he knew of that might be open, but he didn't think anything would be, so he suggested I visit Flo, so I went to her house and luckily she was up and I told her about last night and that I wanted to cook you breakfast as a way to say thanks but you had absolutely *nothing* in the house, but she was so nice and gave me a grocery bag's worth of stuff, so that's how you have bacon this morning." And she turned to flash him another bright smile.

"How'd you get into town?"

"I drove your truck."

Somewhere in Hopper's brain a bomb went off.

"You what?!" he fired.

Anne continued tending to the bacon as she replied casually, "I borrowed your keys and drove your truck."

"You... Anne, you can't just take my truck for a quick run into town! That's an official police vehicle!"

"Well, I couldn't very well *walk* into town, now could I?" she reasoned calmly.

"That's not the point! You stole the Chief of Police's truck! For bacon!"

She looked at him then, something glinting in her eyes as the corner of her mouth twitched. He fought the sudden bubble of amusement that itched at the back of his throat.

"It's not funny," he said instead.

"Okay, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have taken the truck. But can you maybe arrest me *after* breakfast? Bacon's like my favorite thing ever." And she pulled the last few pieces out of the pan and placed the loaded plate on the set table, popping a slice into her mouth.

He felt like he should have yelled at her, somehow get it across to her that what she did was very, very wrong. But as he watched her lick her thumb and forefinger that had touched the piece she ate and whirl back to the counter where a bowl and carton of eggs sat, her hand still clutching the greasy fork, Hopper couldn't feel enough anger to further rebuke her. Instead he felt... touched?

Grumbling a sigh, Hopper padded into the kitchen to grab himself a mug. As he poured the hot coffee, he eyed Anne cracking several eggs into the bowl, then whisking it vigorously with her fork. He shuffled to the table and slumped down into one of the chairs, his gaze never leaving her bustling form. It was hard for him not to notice the ease in which she moved around his place, like she had been a guest of his before.

"Hope you don't mind your eggs scrambled. It's the only way I know how to cook them," she said as she dumped the yellow slime into the bacon pan after she poured most of the grease out into his trash.

"You really didn't have to do all of this," he protested lamely as he lit a cigarette.

"Oh, shut up, I wanted to. I've always liked surprising people with breakfast. It starts their day with a little bit of happiness, you know. Course I like cooking in general. For people, I mean. Not much of a cook for myself. I can't seem to get the portion size right. Always end up making enough for six giving me left-overs for days. I get real tired of eating the same thing twice a day for several days in a row. When I was working at the factory, I'd try to trade lunches with one of the other girls just so I could eat something different..." She

seemed to suddenly catch herself embarking on another string of jabber because she smirked and sucked in her lower lip, giving her head a little shake.

"Sorry," she grinned, "I sometimes prattle when I'm nervous or excited."

"What kind of factory was it?" he asked, leaning back against the wall as he took a puff. He tried not to wonder which emotion she was feeling now and if *he* had anything to do with it. His ego, of course, preferred that he made her nervous.

"A shoe factory. My job was applying the rubber soles. There were four other women in my department. We'd try to race each other to see who could glue on the most soles with the least mistakes. Ramona usually won, she was so fast. But we really didn't keep track, it was just to pass the time. They needed the distraction so I came up with turning it into a sort of game."

"My old man worked in a factory. Steel. Over in Indianapolis. It's hard work."

"He did it his whole life?"

"Forty seven years."

"That's impressive. I lasted two years. Course I'd have probably worked there longer..." and she let the sentence trail off as she lifted the steaming pan of eggs off the burner and scurried over to the table. She scraped half of them onto Hopper's plate and the rest onto hers then dumped the pan into the sink. He waited until she was seated before he picked up his fork and dug into his breakfast.

"So why'd you stop?" he pressed after chewing his first mouthful.

"Huh?" she asked, her mouth processing a strip of bacon.

"The shoe factory job. Why'd you stop?"

"Oh. Well...my mom needed me at home. She was too sick to be alone anymore."

"Oh. I'm sorry," Hopper said sheepishly.

Anne shook her head and gave her shoulders a little shrug. "It's fine," and she smiled kindly at him. "It doesn't bother me to talk about it anymore."

He nodded and steadied his gaze on his plate as he shoveled in another mouthful of food. He wondered if he would ever get to that point.

After a short silence, Hopper took a sip of his coffee and asked, "So did you sleep okay last night?"

"Oh yeah, I was fine. Thanks."

"Good."

She scraped some eggs onto her fork with a piece of toast when her brow wrinkled.

"So are you originally from Indianapolis then?"

"No, I... actually grew up here."

"Oh, no kidding. A townie, huh? You never lived anywhere else?"

"Yeah, when I went to college at Michigan State University then the Police Academy in Lansing. I worked out there for almost ten years before getting a job in Indianapolis. Lived there for almost another ten before moving back here four years ago."

"Did you find a lot had changed?"

"No. Not a lot."

Anne nodded like that was expected.

"That's the appeal, isn't it? After so many years away finding so little different from when you were growing up. It's like coming back to a vacuum sealed memory, fresh as the day it was made. There's a lot of comfort in that when... when you go through huge changes in your life. I mean... that's what I've found."

He studied her as he took a drag on his cigarette. She was avoiding his gaze, even turning a light shade of pink, which he found to be attractive. He couldn't help but grin at her even when he said,

"I thought you said you never left Groveland."

"Hm? No, I never left *Florida*. After high school I went to college myself, but in Tampa."

"What'd you go for?"

"Teaching," she replied a little shyly. "I wanted to be an elementary school teacher."

An image of her squatting down beside a low table of little kids, admiring some boy's pasty disaster of construction paper with a bright smile came easily into his mind.

"And after college in Tampa?"

A lopsided shrug.

"I went back home. It was my sister's turn to go to school by then and mom needed somebody to help her with the store. One thing led to another and I just never got back into teaching. But maybe once I'm in Marquette I will." She finished her last piece of bacon, wiping the grease off of her fingers with the napkin she had laying her lap.

Hopper said nothing.

After breakfast was eaten, they sat in contented silence while finishing their coffee. They had agreed that after they each took their showers, they would get on the road and get Anne a tow. If all went well, she would be on her way to Michigan before sundown.

As she bathed, Hopper cleaned up the kitchen. He could hear the water running and a garbled voice as she sang lightly under the spray. If he could have seen his reflection, he would've witnessed himself grinning. She was a strange one, this Anne with an E.

Cute. But strange.

The sound of the shower stopped and a few minutes later the annoying blare of a hairdryer took its place. He decided to clean off his back deck.

About a foot of snow had fallen in total from the storm. It was a fairly heavy accumulation and, though he wasn't wearing his coat, Hopper had worked up a pretty good sweat while shoveling. He came back inside, breathless, flushed, and with a runny nose, ready for his turn in the shower.

No sooner had he closed the door behind him when Anne flounced up and pecked him on the bottom of his jaw with a delighted giggle.

"You cleaned up my mess in the kitchen! You don't know how lovely that was! Thank you, Jim."

Her head came to about the bottom of his chin as she stood there for a moment after her impromptu kiss, looking up at him with her dancing eyes, a smile playing on her blushed lips as she rested her hand lightly on one of his shoulders. Her shampoo or soap gave off a sweet, fruity scent that reminded him of strawberry Starbursts. Hopper's eyes traveled over her hair and realized it looked exactly as he had imagined it would last night, thick and full of bouncy waves the color of new honey. He had just that single measured beat of time to take all of that in before she moved away to sit on the couch and pack up the items she had used during her stay.

"No problem," he managed to mutter after a delayed second.

He stooped forward under the water spray, letting the jet hit the crown of his head making rivulets swarm over his face. Her scent of strawberry candy lingered heavily in the bathroom and around him.

Like a movie scene being replayed over in his mind, Hopper watched her prance towards him.

Lay her hand softly on his shoulder.

Spring lightly up onto the balls of her feet.

Press her lips to the facial hair on the bottom of his cheek.

Press her lips to the bottom of his cheek.

Her lips on his cheek.

Her lips on him.

Her lips.

Her lips.

He gritted his teeth and forced his eyes open.

The girl would be leaving soon. He would go over to Montauk tonight and try that bar he'd been eyeing out. He'd look for a woman there, maybe even a blonde this time, and he'd flirt with her. And hopefully he would bring her back to his place and let things go too far. And by then, Anne Garrett would be well on her way to Marquette and out of his thoughts.

4. WHEN THE COLD SETS IN

She had called Murphy's while he showered and arranged for a tow truck to meet them at her car within the hour. She figured it'd be easier that way for him, she could just hitch a ride with the mechanic into Hawkins and Hopper could finally be free of her.

"Sounds good," he agreed even as something tugged under his ribs. He slumped in his armchair and fished in his pocket for his pack of Camels.

"You want to, uh, watch something on TV?" he asked stretching over to pick up the remote controller. They had some time to kill before needing to head out.

"You put whatever you want on."

Skipping anything Christmas, he settled on *The Price is Right* before tossing the remote back onto the coffee table.

They sat for several minutes, blindly watching the ecstatic contestants try to win merchandise and money. Hopper sucked away on his cigarette, not terribly interested in the show, wondering how quickly the garage would be able to fix her car. She was probably anxious to leave, perhaps her brother was worried about her...

"Did you want to call your brother? Let him know what happened with your car?"

She tore her eyes away from the TV screen, a sort of blankness covering them.

"Oh, uh, I hadn't thought of that. But, no, I don't need to."

"You sure? Won't he be wondering where you are?"

"No...see...," and she began playing with her cuticles, "Gilbert,...my brother,... doesn't actually... Well, he doesn't know I'm coming, so..."

"What, is it a surprise?"

Her eyes lifted.

"Yeah, yeah. He'll definitely be surprised," and she laughed nervously. He studied her as she continuing picking away at her nail beds. She seemed uneasy, sad even.

"Is everything you own in that Datsun of yours?"

"Yeah."

"And he doesn't know you're coming. Or possibly moving there."

"Nope."

"Boy," and he took a puff.

They had arrived before the tow truck and waited quietly in his Blazer, a bizarre silence hanging between them. She was back in her thrift store get up, though she opted to forego the ski mask and goggles as the weather was infinitely milder than it was the day before. She sat looking out of the window.

"Patrick Murphy is a good guy, he should take care of you," Hopper suddenly said, the weight of the noiselessness making him feel claustrophobic. She turned her face to him.

"If he doesn't I'm going to refer him to you."

They exchanged smiles.

"So, what do you have planned for the rest of your day now that you're nearly rid of me?" she asked, a light tease in her voice.

The bar and blonde popped into Hopper's mind.

"Don't know. Maybe see a movie."

"Nice."

He looked down at his steering wheel wishing the tow truck would just get there already.

Anne cleared her throat after a few moments just as he started

drumming his fingertips on the truck's window ledge. More silence.

Hopper glanced at the time on his dash. Patrick was only about five minutes late, but he wasn't exactly feeling patient at this point. Not that he was itching to be rid of Anne. He cast a glance at her as she leaned her head back against the seat. He was beginning to understand, as he had the time to think about it, that he was simply anxious to be done with something that he didn't really want to do. It felt like anticipating a trip to the dentist or a tedious station meeting or something. Just...get it done. End it so he didn't have to think about it anymore.

Because he was getting real tired of thinking about Anne Garrett leaving.

"Feels kinda weird to be leaving."

Her soft spoken words made him look at her sharply, wondering for a moment if she had some sort of creepy mind reading ability. He didn't exactly discount the unbelievable these days.

"Well, I guess what I really mean is," she clarified a moment later, "it's weird that it feels weird...you know?"

He narrowed his eyes a little. "Sure."

Nah, he really didn't.

She exhaled and looked over at him. "It's just that I've only been here like, what? Twelve hours or so? But it feels like I've been here much longer. That's not normal, is it?"

Hopper shrugged. "I don't know. I guess if you see one small town, you see them all, right?"

"And yet at the same time," she went on somewhat wistfully, glossing over his comment, "I also feel like it's kinda sad that I won't get to learn more. Like I read the first chapter of a book and then just...threw it away? If that makes any sense." She let out a short laugh.

"There would've been a time that I would've told you you weren't

missing much, but now...," he looked over and found her gazing at him expectantly. "Well, every town has its sordid past," he finished lamely.

"Even little old Hawkins, Indiana?" she asked incredulously.

He wanted to say '*Especialy* little old Hawkins, Indiana,' but he simply nodded. He had made a bargain with the devil and he had to hold to it, which included never speaking of the events he went through with anyone.

Not that anyone would've believed him if he had. Except, as he watched her eyes stare off through the windshield, that recognizable quality coming into them whenever someone starts thinking deeply about something, Hopper found himself believing that, of all people, Anne would probably be the one who would believe him if he told her.

"He's here," she suddenly said, a flat quality to her voice. Hopper followed her line of sight and saw the tow truck, lights flashing, coming down the road. He felt a bag of stones fill his stomach.

"Yeah."

When the truck finally decided on its parking spot and the driver popped out of the cab, Anne and Hopper both opened their doors and climbed from the Blazer.

"Hey, Hopper," Patrick Murphy greeted, extending his hand for a shake which Hopper took with a friendly smile. Hopper introduced Anne and verified that they tried to jump start the battery the previous night without success.

"Okay. Let's get it back to my garage and swap out the battery with a new one and that'll take care of your problem for you," Murphy said with a wide grin to Anne. The mechanic walked back to his truck and pulled a shovel out. Hopper and Anne stood by Hopper's truck idly, watching as Murphy tried to make quick work of the snow piled up behind her Datsun.

"I feel like I should be helping him," she murmured to Hopper. She

had her shoulders hunched forward and her arms crossed in front of her chest as she jounced slightly in one spot. Hopper looked down at her and resisted the urge to pull her into his side and rub her arm.

"Why don't you wait in the truck. I'll go see if he needs any help." And he walked across the street before she could argue. When Murphy said he didn't have another shovel with him, Hopper asked if he could take over for a bit, practically stealing the tool from out of his hands. He had a need to be doing something physical, couldn't just stand there and wait any longer. A few minutes into the digging, Hopper had made good headway and Murphy was able to begin connecting the sling to her car.

Huffing from the exercise, Hopper stood aside. He heard his truck door open and close and had Anne standing beside him a moment later, her bag at her feet.

"Aren't you cold?" he asked without looking at her.

"Yeah. But... he's almost done."

Yes he was, Hopper agreed in his mind. Probably just another few minutes.

"I was thinking," he said. His surprise at hearing the words fall out of his mouth made him mute for a second or two. What was he thinking? He looked down at her and found her peering up at him, her forehead wrinkled in a question.

"Maybe I should go with you. To the garage. Just to make sure everything goes alright, I mean."

Her eyes seemed to brighten for a moment, the caramel turning to a more golden color. But then the spark fell as her gaze dropped to the ground. He felt something inside him drop, too.

"That's awfully nice of you, Jim, but... I don't think it's necessary. But thank you just the same."

"Okay," he said with a smile and nod before returning to watch Murphy hoisting up her car. A sense of relief washed over him. He chalked it up to being relieved of duty, as it were, over taking care of

this girl, this stranger. He was in the home stretch now and would soon have the pleasure of having several drinks at a friendly bar in the company of another woman and getting some afterward. He was really looking forward to that now.

"All set!" Murphy called over to them. They both seemed to take a breath at the same time as they turned to each other.

"Have a safe drive, okay?" Hopper said first, the smile feeling like it was burning a hole in his face. He stuck out his hand and she looked at it before taking it. But then she focused her eyes on his again and before he knew what happened, she was hugging him.

"Thanks for everything, Chief. And...", she pulled away just enough so that she could see his face, "and I wish you...all the best. Take care of yourself, Jim." She gave his hand a squeeze, a sad smile on her lips.

"You, too," he replied softly, his own smile falling short of the cheerfulness he wished to convey. She bent down and lifted her bag up with a quick motion before jogging over to the waiting tow truck. Hopper retreated to his Chevy but paused when he opened his driver's side door to watch Murphy pull away into the street. A black limb leaned out of the passenger window and shook at its end, the nibs of a hand just poking out of the sleeve. Hopper grinned warmly and returned her wave. Then he got into his truck and headed home.

When he pulled into his yard, Hopper sat in the Blazer for a solid six minutes, engine off. He let the cold seep in around him, soaking into his clothes and skin. It was real and honest as it swallowed him casually. And it reminded him that for the last several years, he had lived without warmth, without the gentle heat that would come from having someone greet you with a kiss and a smile, who would ask you about your day or show you the picture they drew. The cold is what he knew now, it was familiar, and he would manage with it as he always had.

Throwing open the door, he jumped out of his truck and hurried up to his trailer. One way he liked to manage was by getting himself to a bar and hitting on the most attractive female he found. The booze helped, too.

He dragged off his flannel and undershirt as he headed into the bathroom. The smell of strawberries, though faint, still hung in the air. Ignoring it, he slapped on some cologne then went and dug through his closet for the blue button-down that he had been told brought out the color of his eyes nicely.

He was in his truck again in no time and on his way back to Route 421. At the turn off, he hesitated. Originally he had thought of going to Montauk to a place he hadn't been to before. But that meant driving through Hawkins.

He took a left instead, deciding on an old favorite of his on the edge of Hawkins and Monument called Greasers. He hoped, as he sped along the roadway, that Carl, the owner and bartender, would have the place open on Christmas day. He knew the man had been divorced twice with a few grown kids living scattered across the country somewhere, so, fingers crossed, he was as on his own for the holidays as Hopper was and therefore more inclined to be available to the public.

Hopper wasn't disappointed.

The blue neon sign was on and there were a few cars parked out front when he pulled up to the dive. Leaving his hat on the dashboard, Hopper checked the glove compartment for an extra pack of cigarettes and then sauntered into the dark and sketchy establishment.

Carl was leaning on the bar watching a hockey game when he spotted Hopper.

"Hey, Hop! Good to see you!" he said as he straightened up and grabbed a Schlitz and glass for his new arrival. Hopper took the stool directly in front of Carl, the other patrons preferring the ends or small tables. The two men exchanged pleasantries and went down the list of the usual question and answers while Hopper chewed on a bowl of peanuts and put away his first beer. The next couple of hours was spent in much the same way, with an occasional light conversation with a customer just coming in and a little game watching on Carl's mounted television.

Hopper was enjoying his fourth beer when she came in.

He had seen her there before, a fair haired woman of about Hopper's age, maybe a little older, who dressed like she wanted to be ten years younger. She always came in alone, her hair pulled back in a clip and wearing bright tomato red lipstick and heavy eye makeup. She liked to sit at the bar under the TV. She had made eyes at Hopper more than once, but he had always played it cool with her, his attraction usually for the younger, darker types. But today, his gaze followed her to her seat and didn't waiver when she looked at him and smiled. He smiled back.

The record for the quickest conquest Hopper ever made was back in college when he and a few of his buddies, all pretty well sloshed, crashed a fraternity party on campus. Lisa Something-Or-Other had been there and had caught Hopper's eye as she stood by the radio drinking her vodka and tonic. He would later recount to his friends that all he did was smile at her, walk over, and ask her if she liked The Beach Boys and she had giggled. Twenty minutes later they were locked in one of the bathrooms upstairs going at it in the tub.

That afternoon, Hopper's record was broken by ten minutes.

They had made it as far as her car before things got out of control and needed to be dealt with in the back of her Mercury. Afterward, when they were both enjoying a cigarette, her head leaning on his shoulder, Sandy, as he had learned was her name only minutes before, said,

"Who's Anne?"

Hopper inhaled so strongly from shock that a fleck of saliva traveled down his windpipe into his lungs causing him to burst into a cacophony of wracking coughs. He almost dropped his burning cigarette on her upholstery, but Sandy coolly plucked it from his fingers and waited for him to regain control over his breathing before handing it back to him.

"What?" he finally managed to croak between hacks.

"Anne. You said her name before you...you know," and she discreetly

puffed on her butt instead of providing any further details. Hopper's face contorted into a look of disbelief and confusion.

"I did?"

He had no memory of saying Anne's name. But he did remember imagining it was her and not Sandy he was engaging with, pretending it was her lips that kissed him and her voice in his ear.

"You did," Sandy confirmed as she began pulling her hair back into the clip that Hopper had yanked loose during their romp.

"Ah, jeez, I'm sorry, Sandy."

She gave a little snort and shook her head.

"Oh, honey," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand, "If I got upset every time a man called me by another woman's name during sex, I'd have to be on blood pressure medicine. It's no big deal." With her cigarette pressed firmly between her lips, she tucked her blouse back into her jean skirt as Hopper looked on, still processing what she told him.

"So. Who is she?" she asked when she was finally done straightening her clothes out and sitting back against the seat.

"She's... she's no one."

"No one, huh?" she gave her head a bob to the side, the corner of her mouth turned down skeptically. Hopper chose to ignore her insinuation. He wasn't about to have this conversation with some random stranger with whom he just had sex.

Instead they sat in her car without speaking for a few more minutes, finishing their smokes. Hopper checked his watch. It was close to five and he was hungry. He cocked his head as he regarded his companion.

"You, uh, wanna grab some dinner?"

She gave her head a light shake.

"Nah, I should head home and feed my kids. Teenage boys are constantly hungry." She snuffed out her stub in the ashtray in the back of the driver's seat. "But thanks anyway."

They crawled out of her two-door car, awkwardly maneuvering around the front seats until they were clear of the vehicle. She stood for a moment leaning on her open driver's side door before getting in, a lecherous grin covering her tomato lips.

"I enjoyed myself with you tonight. I've been wanting to get you into the back of my car for a long time. Anyway, it's alright to talk to me next time you see me here or if you're looking for something extra" - she inclined her head towards the backseat- "that's fine with me, too. Buy me a drink if that's the case. It'll be our code. Otherwise just say hi and chat, okay?" She winked at him before sitting down and closing the car door. He waited until she pulled out of the bar parking lot, a steady wind picking up around him. Then he flicked his Camel away and went inside to pay his tab.

5. SACRED SECRETS

As he approached the center of Hawkins, Hopper again reminded himself that he was going to Bamboo House in Montauk because they had the best Chinese take-out. So Murphy's happened to be on his route, so what? He knew that Anne was well on her way to Marquette by now. Definitely long gone. But he just couldn't keep his eyes from checking the garage out as he slowed down while passing it.

Her green Datsun sat outside the end of the building.

The car behind Hopper had to swerve to avoid colliding with his truck as he stomped on his break pedal. He pulled into Murphy's with a screeching protest from his tires.

The office light was still on though the CLOSED sign was hanging on the door. Hopper knocked heavily on the glass, bracing himself against the heavy gusts tearing through town.

Patrick leaned his head out of a back doorway, a pair of glasses on the bridge of his nose. When he recognized Hopper, the mechanic's face changed into a broad smile and he pulled off his spectacles as he went over to open his door.

"Hiya, H-"

"Hey, wha-what's going on with Anne's car? Why's it still here? Where is she?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah that turned out to be kinda a mess. It wasn't her battery... well, it wasn't *only* her battery, her alternator was shot as well. But I don't have all these parts lying around, ya know? I have to order them or find a place that's got them, which is fine, except, ya know, it's Christmas Day on a Sunday, so every place I usually try is closed. So I'm gonna try again tomorrow and hopefully someplace will have one and I won't have to order it from the city."

"Yeah, okay, but where's Anne?"

He could actually feel his heart racing. The Tuinal chafed in his pocket.

Patrick looked up and down the street as if he was expecting to see her just standing there or walking along the sidewalk.

Not in this weather, Hopper thought.

"Oh, I...I don't know. She said she was going to explore the town for a bit. But that was a couple of hours ago." Hopper was already walking away, scanning Hawkins' center, looking for a toddling figure in black. But the sun had set nearly an hour ago, casting the town into darkness penetrated only by the occasional storefront light or streetlamp. The wind, too, seemed to be getting stronger.

"She didn't say anywhere specific?" Hopper called back over his shoulder as he headed for his truck.

"Nah! Well,...she did mention maybe seeing a movie."

That's a start, he thought as he threw himself into his Blazer. He drove slowly down the main thoroughfares as he headed towards the Hawk theatre, scrutinizing both sides of the road. He was an idiot for not insisting on going with her to the garage. What was she planning on doing for the night? Why didn't she go to the station and have someone contact him?

Double parking in front of the cinema, Hopper jumped out of the truck, a blistering ball in the pit of his stomach. He rounded the front end and came to a jarring stop.

She was sitting on the ground against the wall just under the marquee trying to get out of the wind, her legs scrunched up to her chest with her arms wrapped around her knees. Her head was tilted forward so that her hood blocked any view of her face, her overnight bag sitting next to her on the ground.

"Anne?" he called after a beat passed.

Her head jerked up. Scraping the hood back, she scrambled to her feet. He watched as her face went from frowning uncertainty to utter glee.

"Jim!" she hollered, her expression wide and bright as she hurried to meet him on the curb. She threw her arms around his middle, plastering the side of her face to his chest and giving him a pleasant squeeze.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you!" she said, her mouth slightly muffled by his coat. He held her lightly to him, afraid to allow himself a full embrace of her body, that she would sense where he had been and what he had been doing. She pulled away before he could change his mind, her face still glowing with a smile.

"What happened? Why didn't you try to get in touch with me?" he asked only a little severely. It *was* awfully good to see her. He could feel a floppy smile perking the corner of his mouth as he gazed down at her.

"That stupid car of mine! Apparently it needs some other part that Patrick couldn't get right away. He's gonna hopefully get it tomorrow. But, I promise, I did try to call you from the garage, but there was no answer. I figured you were out or asleep or something, so I didn't try again right away. Which," and she leaned her head closer to his chest again and took a couple of deep whiffs, "it smells like you went out."

Hopper felt himself cringe.

"It's, uh, too cold out here. Get in the truck, I'm gonna grab your bag." He gave her arm a little press towards the Blazer as he strode past her.

After putting her things in the back and getting behind the steering wheel, he found her tucked into the corner, still beaming.

"It's so good to get out of that wind."

"What were you doing in it anyway? You should've gone to the station, Anne."

"Yeah, I thought about it. But...well, you had said you were maybe gonna see a movie," and she rose a shoulder.

He restrained a smile and shook his head.

"I'm hungry. You hungry?" he asked.

"I'm starving," she admitted.

"Good. Let's get dinner."

On their way to the Chinese restaurant, Hopper listened as Anne told him how she spent the last several hours. She had a knack for telling stories, he realized, as he absorbed the words through the sound of her voice, creating images out of them. Before, when she would just talk to him like she did in the truck when he first picked her up or in the kitchen that morning, it was simply that, talking. Prattle is what she called it.

But she related her experience like it was a scene from a movie, easily fabricating pictures as she spoke, turning the tale at all angles so that Hopper found himself enjoying her narration.

She told him how Murphy drove like a nervous old woman, all hunched forward over the wheel, his grease-stained hands gripped at 10 and 2, and that each time a car passed him, he'd suck in his breath like he was doing a reverse whistle.

She told him how she spent the first hour in the office waiting for Murphy to replace her battery, from watching a particularly aggressive squirrel and its antics in a patch of landscape across the street to listening to Murphy and another employee, Gerald, argue over which radio station to listen to. Gerald won and country music reigned for the remainder of the day.

And she told him about what she saw as she walked around town after Murphy gave her the bad news about the alternator. How the stores reminded her of something on the cover of a Saturday Evening Post with their Christmas decorations, the way certain places organized their window displays. How Hawkins felt like an old friend even though nothing was open and there were hardly any people out and about. She said even the buildings seemed friendlier than in any place she'd been to in Florida.

The cold and wind had driven her back to the garage where Murphy advised her to start thinking about staying for another night in town.

She had tried Hopper's number again and when there was still no answer she wondered if perhaps he went out of town himself or something else had come up. She didn't want to be a bother so she told Murphy she was going to walk around the place some more, maybe see a movie. But she asked for her keys, keeping the idea of spending the night in her car to herself.

Bamboo House was pretty busy when Hopper and Anne arrived. They were seated at the bar and given water and tea right away.

"So what's good here?" she asked as she flipped open the menu.

"You'll never have better Chicken Kung Pao anywhere else. And the fried dumplings are amazing."

"Sold. But if I've had better, you're buying."

She hadn't. But she split the bill with Hopper anyway.

Hopper felt relaxed as they sat there eating together, talking about themselves in a non-specific way. He hadn't told Anne about his daughter and divorce, he wasn't sure why. He had grown used to people already knowing about his past, so maybe the chore of having to explain everything, reliving it essentially, was what always put him off about telling someone new. If he did mention Sarah to someone who didn't know, Hopper found it easier to lie than face the sympathetic looks, the questions in their eyes.

But Anne's inquiries into his life seemed to skate around the subject of family somehow. She'd ask him about police work or growing up as an only child in Indiana, his interest in the outdoors and playing poker. It was nice to laugh with someone again, and to make them laugh in return. There was one point when she touched his hand, as a gesture emphasizing a point, but Hopper found himself happy to have received it, wanting it to happen again and for longer. But he pretended to ignore it and continued drinking his beer, letting the skin where she had made contact cool. Conversation with her was comfortable and fluid and Hopper didn't feel like he had to be on guard with her. So when the bartender put their bill down, he was surprised to look up at the wall clock and see they had been there for close to three hours. He cast a glance around and found the place

empty except for another couple mooning at each other in a corner booth. The staff was cleaning the place up, it being nearly closing time.

"I guess we'd better head home," he said as he pulled out his wallet.

"Listen, Jim, you don't have to put me up again. Once was already more than generous of you. Wouldn't you rather drop me off at a motel?"

"No, it's fine."

She looked at him like he was lying straight to her face.

"It's fine," he repeated with emphasis.

"Okay, but I can't make you breakfast again tomorrow. No bacon."

"Well, in that case the deal is off." Her laugh cascaded around him bringing a smile to his face.

They paid for their meal and headed back out into the whipping December wind.

"My, god, I can't wait to get out of this stupid snowsuit."

Hopper kept his eyes ahead of him on the road, but the corner of his mouth lifted. The memory of catching her emerging from her bulky cocoon the night before ballooned in his mind, spreading a familiar warmth through his body. Clamping his lips together, Hopper cleared his throat.

"Man, this wind is really something," he said, desperate to get his mind off of Anne undressing in his living room.

"Sure is." Her head was turned out to her window, the outskirts of Montauk gliding by in an array of suburban cookie-cutter homes.

They weren't far from the Hawkins line when police lights appeared in the street ahead of them. Hopper slowed down as they drew nearer, a barricade and an officer blocking through traffic. He waved as Hopper pulled up beside him, lowering his window.

"Hey, Stu, what's happening?"

"Hey, Hop, gotta fallen tree branch across the road here, a big one. Waiting for the boys from Montauk to get here with their chainsaws. You'll have to take Dennison Street here and go around."

"Anyone hurt?"

"Nah, just a few damaged vehicles, some houses without power, that kind of thing."

"Do you want me to radio in to Hawkins and see if the guys there can help out?"

"Appreciate it, but I think, once our people get here, we'll be alright."

"Alright, well-"

"Hey, we should get together and go for a beer or something soon, Hopper. It's been a while since we hung out. My wife is starting to think it has something to do with her cooking that's made you stop coming by," and he gave a lighthearted chuckle.

"She does turn out a pretty horrible ham dinner, Stu," Hopper joked. The police officer responded with a good-natured laugh.

"Well, tonight it was lasagna. Wanted to do an all Italian dinner for Christmas this year. When I tell her I ran into you she'll insist I bring you over a plate. Or-" he flipped his wrist and checked his watch "-you could stop by now and get some leftovers yourself. The kids would love to see you, Hop. Addy's just lost a baby tooth and been showing everybody-"

"I'd really love to, Stu, but I, uh, got company tonight," and Hopper gestured towards Anne, the muscles in his back, shoulders, and neck constricting at the mention of the kids. Addy was only a year younger than what Sarah was when she died. Stu's older daughter was the age Sarah would've been if she had lived.

Stu ducked his head to Anne with a smile. She grinned and waved.

"Oh, that's great, Hopper! Lynn will be thrilled to find out you're still

seeing... Shannon, is it? I'm sorry, it's just been so long since seeing you-"

"This is Anne, Stu, and we're not...she's just-" Hopper could feel his insides congeal and heave as he fought to speak, to choose the correct adjective to describe what exactly he and Anne were or were not.

Stu's face fell into an embarrassed frown.

"Aw, jeez, I'm sorry...I couldn't really see your face, miss... Anne. What happened with... was it Sharon you brought over that one time?"

"No, it was Shannon, nah, uh, things didn't, uh, pan out, but look it, it was nice seeing you again-" Hopper had to get away, to end this interchange that felt like he was running his fingernails against a chalkboard that was on fire.

"Aw, Hop, I'm sorry, that's too bad. Lynn and I were really hoping that you'd find someone. Shannon seemed real nice. But hey, I'm sure Anne here is nice, too," and Stu gave her a wink before continuing, "But you should think about stopping by anyway sometime. I know the holidays are rough for you and, like I said, Lynn and the kids-"

"Yeah, thanks, Stu, I'll be sure to do that, but we gotta get going. Tell Lynn I said hi, okay?" and he put the truck in reverse and started backing away as Stu hurried with his goodbye. Hopper swung onto Dennison as he rolled the window back up, his arm grazing the lump in his pocket where his medicine bottle lay stashed with every rotation of the handle.

They didn't speak at first. Hopper was doing his best to tamp out the embarrassment, anger, discomfort, and pain that rioted inside of him. He stole a side glance at Anne. She was looking down at her lap.

"Sorry about that," he tried to say with an ease he was far from feeling, ending the apology with a forced snicker. "Stu isn't exactly good at knowing when people are just, you know,... like what we are. As in...not together."

"It's fine," she said quickly, almost rattled.

"Look, just don't take it personal, alright? Stu's an idiot-"

"He's not an idiot." Her voice was soft but protective of the man who mistook her for one of Hopper's previous flings.

"He can be. He doesn't know when to keep his mouth shut." Hopper found himself responding to her quiet defensiveness with a steady increase of blood pressure. He knew it was anger with Stu that he was feeling, but Stu wasn't the one sitting next to him at the moment. Besides, shouldn't she be pissed off at him, too?

"He's a good friend who's concerned about you."

"Oh yeah? Screw that, I don't need his concern. He's got nothing to be concerned about. The man should just mind his own business."

"He only meant well, Jim."

"And why are you sticking up for him? Not only did he think you were an old fling of mine, but he also assumed we were together." He could feel himself getting more and more worked up, a spinning ride at a fair that was only moving faster, getting scarier.

"That didn't upset me. Why *wouldn't* he think those things?"

Her calm and reasonable demeanor only bewildered him. He wanted her to be just as angry at Stu as he was, and to have her say otherwise was unhinging any last restraints that he had holding on to his temper.

"He's got no right to! He's sticking his nose into what he shouldn't, making me look like a jerk. I don't care if he's concerned or only means well, neither one of those things does me any good!"

"Maybe if you had just explained to him-"

"Explained what, Anne? What could I have possibly said to him that would make him leave me alone without coming across as a giant ass?! He wouldn't have understood!"

"He would've, Jim. He clearly just wants you to be happy and he thinks having you over for dinner and spending time with him and

his family would help you. If he knew that it hurt you to be around them then-

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." His blood was pounding in his ears, a sharp whistle screaming in the back of his brain. "Why'd you say that?"

She looked confused for a fraction of a second, but then he saw something pass over her face and he knew she had realized her mistake. He waited for her to backpedal her way out of the blunder, throwing out excuses or deflecting his question. Instead she calmly replied,

"Because it's true, isn't it?"

"True or not, why would you think that?"

She was looking back down at her lap, her fingers presumably fidgeting within the sleeves as they lay with their ends touching. She wasn't saying anything.

Hopper yelled a string of curses into the thickened atmosphere.

"You know, don't you?!"

When she didn't deny it, it took all of his will power not to press the gas pedal to the floor of the truck or to send themselves careening off the side of the road into one of the passing fields. His mind started going into overdrive, breaking down every conversation they had together, looking for any indication that Anne wasn't who she said she was. He had been so stupid to let his guard down, to think that she was just some innocent motorist passing through Hawkins. Who drives through Hawkins to get to Michigan anyway? The only way she could've known about Sarah and Diane is if she was working with the Department of Energy or was some kind of reporter. Unless someone from town informed her.

"Who told you?! Was it Murphy? Did Murphy tell you? Was it Flo? Jones?"

"No one told me anything, Jim."

"Then how do you know?!"

"I actually don't *know* anything, not for sure. I had only my conjectures."

"Oh, really? Well, then, why don't you enlighten me."

"You're upset. We shouldn't be talking about this-"

"I said tell me!" he barked. If he could've grabbed her throat, he would've.

She took a breath, closed her eyes for a brief second, then opened them.

"Last night, in the truck on our way to the Sunnyside Motel I had asked you if you had ever been to Florida. You had said 'we almost went, but then Life happened' and you looked...sad. You're not wearing a wedding ring, so I thought you either had a girlfriend or whatever relationship you were in had dissolved. Before that when I talked about *Anne of Green Gables* you got visibly shaken, like I had reminded you of a bad memory. You took one of those pills. You lied when you said it was for heartburn because I know what the effects of a barbiturate looks like and not more than ten minutes after you popped one you were relaxed enough to actually try and have a conversation with me when you could barely stand to look at me before that. Now why would a heartwarming story like *Anne of Green Gables* get someone all upset? It's a children's story. I put it aside, decided I didn't know anything. But then you took me to your home. You have a picture hanging on your wall by the door, a child's drawing of a family; a mother, father, and a little girl. That picture means a lot to you, it's prominently displayed so that every time you walk out of your door, every time you sit down at your table, you see it. And it's not new. It's a little beat up around the edges. The little girl in the drawing was the same little girl who drew it. It was your daughter. But there are no family pictures around the house. I can understand not keeping a picture of an ex-wife around, but why wouldn't you have pictures of your daughter? The last thing I noticed was that, although you didn't wear a wedding band, you did wear that bracelet you have on your right wrist. A blue braid. You never take it off, not even to shower. So I guessed it was something she had made. You didn't talk about her, never even led on that you had a daughter. Or an ex-wife. So. Adding all of those observations up, plus

throwing in the booze and women, and you got yourself a man who'd been through something that he wanted to forget, something tragic. Divorce is difficult and painful, rarely tragic. This was worse. This was something that no parent should ever have to go through. But I didn't *know* any of this to be true. What Stu said back there only seemed to confirm what I guessed. And then your reaction to him. Now. Am I wrong?"

Hopper sat there, cold and rigid. She had managed to strip him naked, expose him, in less than a minute. He felt an overwhelming desire to both weep and scream himself hoarse, to fling every filthy, vulgar word in the English language at her face before throwing himself at her feet and beg to be held.

"Jim?"

He swallowed. He very carefully and deliberately slid his hand down into his pant's pocket where the Tuinal sat waiting and pulled the bottle out. She watched as he pried the cap off and shook out a capsule, then clap it into his mouth deftly.

They didn't speak for the rest of the car ride back to his house.

6. FIRELIGHT CONFESSIONS

He had just wanted to go to bed and pretend they had never run into Stu, to sleep off the last half hour like none of it had ever happened. Anne had stood at the door when they first got home, holding her bag like she'd be heading out at any moment, watching him as he put away the leftovers from dinner.

"I shouldn't stay."

"Why not?" he growled.

"Because I've upset you and now it's uncomfortable."

She had a knack of getting to the point and revealing ugly truths.

"You've got nowhere else to go," he stated, flinging his arms out wide, like the whole world was unavailable to make accommodations for her.

"Then let's talk about this until things are okay again."

"I don't want to talk about this, Anne, I don't want to do anything but go to bed." And to make his point, Hopper stalked past her to his bedroom, closing the door behind him and locking it.

He got as far as removing his shoes and peeling off his shirt and tossing it into a corner when the lamp on his nightstand flickered. The hairs on the back of his neck and along his arms stood on end.

Then the light went out.

After what happened with Will Byers, Hopper had prepped his trailer in case he ever ran into the monster himself. Based on what the kids and everyone else who dealt with the creature said, Hopper had multiple firearms and ammunition locked in his bedroom closet, several flashlights posted throughout the floor plan, and a baseball bat somewhere in every room. The second the lamp went dark, he charged to his nightstand and grabbed the flashlight and key to the gun case.

"Anne! Anne, get in here!" he shouted as he threw open his closet door and knelt down to the metal storage box that held his shot gun and back up revolver.

"Anne!" he bellowed again. He heard his doorknob rattle.

"Jim! Jim, it's locked!" she yelled through the wood as she slammed her hand against the barrier. Swearing, Hopper vaulted to his door and twisted the lock open, pulling Anne into the room behind him before slamming it shut again.

"What's wrong? What happened?" she cried as he thrust the baseball bat he yanked out from under his bed into her hands.

"Stay close to me, okay? Keep your back to my back! If you see anything that moves that isn't me, hit it with the bat!"

"Is there something in here?!" she shrieked as she threw her backside against Hopper's, looking around the darkened room wildly.

"I don't know where it is yet."

They spun around slowly in a tight circle, Hopper whipping the beam of his flashlight all around as he kept his gun aimed high. His heart slammed against the inside of chest as he panted through the rush of adrenaline that was currently coursing through his veins. He could feel Anne trembling behind him, hear her heavy breathing as she turned the circuit with him.

When a minute passed, he tilted his head to his shoulder and asked in a hushed tone,

"Did you hear anything while you were out in the living room? Anything strange?"

"No," she whispered back, her voice laced with panic.

He stopped turning and she followed suit. Together they stood back to back in the blackness surrounding them, panting, listening to the quiet inside his home. Outside the wind wailed on.

A couple of more minutes passed.

Suddenly Hopper's hand radio sprang to life with the staticky voice of Officer Phil Callahan.

"Callahan to Chief, do you copy?"

Hopper scrambled for his hand-held lying on his nightstand.

"Hopper here."

"Chief, we just got a report in that some power lines went down near you. Did you lose electricity?"

Hopper released a gusting sigh, a mixture of relief and self reproach. He clamped a hand over his face.

"Yeah, we sure did, about five or ten minutes ago."

"Alright, well we already informed the power company, but they been busy all night, don't know when they'll get a truck out there. You alright so far?"

"Yeah, yeah we're fine, Phil, thanks. Hopper out."

Hopper slumped onto his bed and leaned forward onto his knees, digging his palms into his eyes.

"Jim?" Anne's voice was quiet, tentative, like the gentle touch of someone trying to wake another person softly.

He felt her slide down beside him on the bed, her hand coming to rest on his shoulder. She was squared up against him, the whole side of their bodies in contact with one another. He was suddenly hyper aware that he was shirtless and that she was out of her snowsuit.

"Jim."

"It's alright, Anne. Everything's alright. It was a...false alarm."

"What happened?"

"Nothing, I...I thought... I thought there was something in the house. I mean someone. I thought I heard someone after the lights went out.

I'm sorry that I scared you."

Her hand was cool against his flaming skin and he thought she must be chilled. Then he realized that without electricity, there was no heat.

He groaned.

"What? What is it?" she asked, her hand suddenly clutching his shoulder.

"No, everything's fine, it's just that...well, we've got no heat now."

"Oh." Then, "*Oh.*" And as if just recognizing that she was cold, she wrapped her arms around her shoulders.

"Come on. Let's go out to the living room. I'll get a fire started." He covered her shoulders with his arm and lifted her up off the bed with him as he stood. She leaned into him as they rose and Hopper hesitated for a moment before releasing her to lead the way out of his bedroom.

She sat hunched on the couch while he worked on the fire, training the flashlight onto what he was doing so he could see. They didn't speak as he worked. He tried to think of something he could say to excuse the way he reacted in the car and then again when the lights went out. He was surprised she hadn't cut and run, he was obviously not as balanced as he liked to appear. What could he possibly tell her that wouldn't make him sound completely insane? He couldn't tell her the truth anyway as per his agreement with the people at the lab. He realized there was nothing he could do that would make the situation better.

When the fire was burning of its own free will, Hopper climbed into his armchair with a heavy sigh. She turned off the light and unfolded the blanket that she had used the previous night, draping it around her, and climbed down onto the floor to sit closer to the fireplace. But she was looking at him as he watched the flames.

"You'll get cold," she said. He glanced down at his still shirtless torso and nodded before getting up and disappearing into his bedroom to

throw a shirt on and grab the blanket off his bed.

"Sit by the fire," she said when he came back out, and she scooped over to make room for him.

They both kept their eyes riveted to the dancing flames allowing the silence to ripen between them. Hopper could feel the cold creeping in as the heat slowly dissipated beyond the realm of the fireplace. He'd have to sleep out there tonight if the power didn't get turned back on soon. Leaning back on his hands, he was able to watch the orange glow from the fire cast its light onto Anne's face and hair turning her into electric amber, bright and warm. He nearly reached out to run his fingers through the golden shimmer of her hair just to see if it was as hot as the fire made it look, but he stopped himself. He felt like a fool.

"You were wrong about the bracelet," he suddenly said. She turned her face to look at him, casting half of it into shadow, a yellow crescent moon wondering what he was talking about.

"Earlier. After you told me how you figured out about my daughter and you asked if you were wrong. You were wrong about my bracelet." He lifted his arm up to slide it off his wrist and hand it to her. She took it and studied it in the firelight.

"She didn't make it, I did. They were the ties she wore in her hair. But as she got sicker and her hair fell out, I took them and made it into this so I could wear it until she got better and she could wear them again. Except she never did. So now I wear it as a way of keeping her with me always, to remind me of her."

Anne handed it back to him and watched as he slid it back onto his wrist.

"I'm sorry, Jim."

He looked back into the fire as she kept her gaze fixed on his face.

"Losing Sarah was the hardest and worse thing that's ever happened to me. My wife, Diane,...it was hard on her, too. She needed me but I couldn't deal with anything afterward, I didn't...I didn't have any

strength left. We tried to make it work, but it felt useless without Sarah there. She wanted another baby, but I couldn't...I couldn't bring myself to bring another child into this world for the sake of replacing Sarah. I just wanted to stop feeling the pain and alcohol and pills took it away for a little while. I turned to that and she... she turned to Bill. We divorced less than a year after Sarah died. I had moved back here before then, hoping to get my life somewhat back on track. You can see how well that worked out."

He had never admitted to anyone his reliance on drugs and alcohol and he was fearful that Anne would start preaching at him. But she laid her hand on his knee and just kept her eyes steady on his.

"I was a bad husband, Anne," Hopper continued, her silence seeming to coax more words from him, "I should've been there for her, I should've tried harder, been stronger, not just shut down like I did. I handled everything all wrong. Everything. Even with Sarah. There were things that I did, decisions that I made...they were wrong. And it ruined everything. I destroyed not just my life but Diane's and probably Sarah's, too," he shook his head, the emotion building up behind his eyes, "They deserved better. But I wasn't strong enough. I didn't... I couldn't."

Anne leaned down and stopped his mouth with her own, taking Hopper by surprise. For a moment his brain stopped functioning and he could only decipher the faintest smell of strawberries that hung on her skin. But as she worked her lips gently with his, Hopper suddenly became alive and responded to her kiss fervently. He brought himself forward, encircling her body with his arms, their lips never leaving each other as their blankets fell forgotten to the floor. He pressed her to him, deepening the kiss that she started.

When they finally parted, breathless, intoxicated from the embrace, he held her fast to him, leaning his forehead to hers.

"Why...why'd you kiss me?"

He prayed it wasn't because she felt bad for him.

She brought her hand up to his cheek, brushing the backs of her fingers against his scruff.

"You needed it. To remind you that, despite what you think, you're a good man who deserves a little happiness. And love." She pressed a kiss to his mouth, then pulled back with a coy smile, "And I've been wanting to since you pulled your gun on that drunk at the motel. If I'm being *really* honest, probably even before that. I have a weakness for a man in a uniform."

Hopper smiled and leaned in to her warmed lips.

"Ladies love the uniform."

Almost by mutual unspoken agreement, things didn't escalate beyond making out. It was difficult for Hopper to hold back, especially since she was only wearing the long sleep shirt that reached her mid thigh, the sweatpants not having been put on before the lights had gone out. But he managed to keep things under control, focusing on her lips and the way she smelled and how her hair felt in his hands. The biggest reason that he hung back was because of his tryst with Sandy from earlier. He hadn't changed or showered since their meeting and he still could feel her on his skin and clothes. He didn't want to cheapen what was happening with Anne by having the touch and scent of a strange woman clinging to his body. And Anne didn't seem to be pushing to go any further herself.

As the fire died down and they were reminded of the cold surrounding them, Hopper brushed one last kiss across her bruised lips before getting up to add wood to the fireplace. As he did so, Anne scurried to where her sweatpants lay on the floor beside her bag and pulled them on.

"You're not getting back into your snowsuit, are you?" Hopper teased, pushing the burned logs around to make room for new ones.

"It's tempting, but no. Hey, what if we push the couch closer to the fireplace? My butt is numb from sitting on the floor for so long."

Hopper's mind immediately brought forward how his hand had labored hard against the fleshy roundness of her bottom as they kissed and wondered if *that* wasn't what caused her to lose feeling in it. He bit his lip and threw a small log onto the glowing bed of embers.

She had pushed the coffee table out of the way already when he joined her in moving the couch closer to the heat source. With his flashlight, he grabbed a couple of beers and his pack of smokes before joining her on the couch. She nestled up to him right away and he contentedly slung his arm around her shoulders so that she could lean her head against his chest. Swaddled in the blankets, they sat quietly, sipping their beer and enjoying the flames as he puffed away on a cigarette, his feet crossed at the ankles and resting on the armchair. As Anne's breathing grew heavy and even and her hold on the can of Schlitz began to loosen, Hopper carefully took it out of her hand and set it on the floor beside him. She snuggled deeper into his side, but didn't wake, her hand resting comfortably on his thigh.

He wondered if he made a mistake in not letting things go too far. She would probably be gone the following day sometime and he would likely never see her again. The thought made something inside his chest ache and he took a swig of beer to lessen the throb. Would he regret not having her while he could? Or perhaps it had been wrong of him to kiss her back, encouraging the attraction he felt for her, and he certainly *did* feel it. She had admitted to him that she had wanted to kiss him since the motel, but when did he start perceiving *her* allure? His thoughts went to the drive to the motel, when she had made a small jab at him not being the long-story type. He realized now that she was being funny and the memory made him chuckle lightly. As Hopper recalled the half hour or so in the truck to Montauk, his heart seemed to warm and he understood that it was then that he began to be drawn to her, a bright and cozy flame that appeared to shrug off the nagging shadows that were his constant companion.

As he felt himself slipping into sleep, Hopper's brain managed to flash one last image into his mind, of he and Anne standing out on the deck overlooking Loon Pond, her head leaning back against his chest as they watched the sunset. It was summer.

7. SOMETHING WORRISOME

When Hopper awoke the next morning, he was stretched out on the couch with Anne wedged between him and the back cushions, her arm draped across his chest and her knee hooked over his thigh. He remembered waking up in the middle of the night discovering the fire had gone down to a few coals and he had peeled himself away from Anne to get it going again. When he trudged back to the sofa he found her laid out on her side. He had gingerly prodded her to move over and slid down onto his back allowing her to lay halfway on top of him. He had pulled one of the blankets up over their entwined bodies and fallen back asleep almost right away.

He took a few minutes to enjoy laying there with her, listening to her light breathing and feeling the warmth of her body against his. Sometime also during the night the electricity was restored making the temperature comfortable again. He ran his eyes over his bracelet, then, rubbing his face, Hopper steeled himself and nudged her arm.

"Anne... Anne. I gotta get up." She groaned in response and rubbed her face against his shoulder, unwilling to be roused. But it was Monday and Hopper was due in at the station at eight. He lifted her arm off of him and began extricating the rest of his body from her grip.

"It's too early, Jim," she whined in a husky voice, refusing to open her eyes.

"I know, I know, but I gotta get to work," he replied wearily as he stood and stretched, already dreading the day he was to spend on the job. He shuffled to the bathroom as she turned away and pulled the blanket over her head with another sound of disapproval.

After he showered and did the rest of his bathroom routine, Hopper looped a towel around his waist to head into his bedroom. When he came out into the living room, Anne was sitting cross-legged on the couch with a cup of coffee in her hand, reading his copy of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Her hair was adrift around her shoulders, the sunlight coming in from the window behind her turning it into molten gold. She looked up when he walked in and he thought he

caught her blush as her eyes roved over his form. She looked back down at her book quickly and said,

"There's coffee if you want it. I'm going to take a shower and head in with you if that's okay. I should get over to see Murphy about the car."

He felt his chest deflate. He mumbled some sort of reply before continuing on his way into his bedroom to get dressed.

When Hopper pulled into the garage's parking lot, Murphy was already inside the office making phone calls. Hopper made like he was going to get out with her to go inside, but she stopped him.

"You don't need to go with me, Jim, I can take care of it. Besides, aren't you running late for work?"

He looked at his watch. It was already quarter past eight.

"You'll call me after you talk to Murphy?" He was suddenly terrified she would leave without saying goodbye.

"Yes," she smiled and she started climbing out of the truck.

"What are you gonna do in the meantime? I don't imagine putting in an alternator is a quick job."

She stood outside with the passenger door open, her overnight bag in her hands.

"I was thinking I might walk around town again, see the places that were closed yesterday. And I brought this," she pulled out *The Old Man and the Sea* and waved it at him, "I can read more if I get bored." He gave a grim nod. He wasn't liking the idea of dumping her off and heading into work.

"I'll call you," she promised before slamming the door and scurrying towards the garage's office. He waited until she was inside before turning around and heading to the station, a strange lump forming in his gut.

Hopper sat at his desk staring at the report he had been filling out

only a couple of days ago. Some kids had gone around a wealthy neighborhood knocking over snowmen. The paperwork should've been simple enough, but Hopper was finding himself too distracted to finish it.

He looked up at the clock again. 9:40.

Why was Anne taking so long to call him? There didn't appear to be anyone else waiting in the office at Murphy's when she went in. Maybe Murphy was relating to her the story of his and his wife's recent trip to Myrtle Beach. It seemed to take him forever to tell when Hopper got stuck hearing about it a few weeks ago. Yeah, that was probably it.

Taking a deep breath, Hopper refocused himself on the paper in front of him with pen in hand.

The phone suddenly rang making him jump for the receiver before Flo could pick it up out in reception. But it wasn't Anne, just some Hawkins resident calling about a suspicious vehicle driving up and down her street. Hopper rolled his eyes and transferred the call to Callahan's desk.

When it was close to eleven, Hopper stood up with the finished report and decided he was going to take a little trip past the garage once it was filed. Things must have gotten worse for her to go radio silent on him and, as much as he hated to admit it, he was getting worried. But he hesitated at the doorway.

Flo was at the filing cabinet with a bunch of folders in her hand.

When he came in that morning, she had a look in her eyes that made him want to bee line it to his office. She snagged him, however, right outside the door.

"I met Anne Garrett yesterday, Hop. Seems like a lovely girl."

"Oh. Yeah. Hey, thanks for the groceries, Flo. How much do I owe you?"

"How about just having Harold and I over for dinner? We haven't been invited to your place in quite some time. I wouldn't mind if it

was tonight seeing as Miss Garrett is supposed to be leaving soon. Going to Michigan I hear."

"Tonight? I don't think-

"Of course, if you got other plans then I guess you could just replace the things she took. Sweet girl. Has a sort of...innocence about her, doesn't she?"

"Mmhm."

"Hate to see her get hurt. A lot of folks would think they could take advantage of a nice, young thing like her, seeing as how she's just passing through."

"Mm."

"It's awfully nice letting her stay with you, Hop. Not a kindness I would expect from you normally. If it's a bother, I'd be happy to let her stay with us. That is, if she hasn't gone on her way already."

"She, uh, she might be leaving today, actually. She's at the garage now. But really, it's no problem for me, Flo, though it's nice of you to offer. Listen, I gotta get to some paperwork that's on my desk, so..." and he had retreated into his office before she could threaten him further.

Now as he stood looking out into the lobby, watching the older woman accomplishing her office duties, Hopper wasn't sure he was ready for another onslaught. Taking a deep breath and reminding himself that he was Chief around here, Hopper made his way out into the open.

"Hey, Phil, did you take care of that suspicious vehicle call I gave you earlier?" Hopper asked as he walked quickly to where the filing cabinets were.

"Yeah, Chief, it was nothing."

Hopper nodded like he was paying attention, but he was just doing his best to avoid eye contact with Flo.

"When did you get your power back, Chief?" Officer Cal Powell asked as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

"Oh, late, I think. Did anyone else lose power?"

He successfully slid the manilla folder into place and could now withdraw, Flo not seeming to be interested in another row. Nobody else had lost their electricity, though there were reports of different areas of Hawkins being affected by the wind.

"Listen, I'm going to take a drive around, see what the damage is from last night's weather. I'll be back-"

But at that moment, Anne walked into the station, bag in hand, pulling her hood back from her head and giving everyone a bright smile.

"Hey! Oh, hi, Flo! Nice to see you again!" and she waved her black noodle of an arm at the secretary.

"Anne, what are you-" Hopper began, but Anne whisked past him to give Flo a quick hug who took the gesture of affection with a smile. Anne turned to Hopper then and said,

"Sorry, I know I told you I'd call, but I figured I would just walk over, hope that's okay. Can I have some coffee? I'm freezing!" And before Hopper could respond, she was at the table pouring herself a mug. Powell still stood beside the coffee urn so, after filling her cup, she turned to him, and extended her free hand.

"Hello, I'm Anne Garrett."

"Cal Powell. Nice to meet you."

Phil, not wanting to be left out of the loop, stood up and leaned over his desk offering his hand, too.

"Phil Callahan, Miss Garrett, pleased to meet you."

"Well, now that everyone knows each other... Anne, would you please come with me into my office?" Hopper said, sweeping his arm out towards the exit.

"Uh, yeah, I just gotta fix my coffee...do you guys have any sugar substitute?" Anne asked as she prodded the container of sweetener.

"I have some in my purse, dear, how many would you like?" Flo offered.

"Two? Thanks, Flo."

No one saw Hopper tilt his head back and bite his upper lip as his hands came to rest on his belt.

"So how long have you two been working here?" Anne inquired of the two officers while Flo went to retrieve her bag.

"I'm just gonna go ahead and go to my office. You can make your way over when you're ready. Maybe after your coffee." He didn't try to hide his disgruntled tone. But Phil and Cal were both talking over him and Anne barely acknowledged what he said as she listened to the men's answers. Hopper smacked his lips and stalked away.

He could hear them laughing as he sat behind his desk, twisting impatiently in his chair, flicking the pen he had between his fingers. He was rehearsing what he was going to say to her, really laying it on how she had promised to telephone him as soon as she found anything out about her car. There had been no agreement that she would walk over to tell him; she was supposed to call.

He flicked his eyes to his clock and swore.

She had been out there yacking it up with Flo and the guys for fifteen minutes. He considered just getting up and walking out. Getting into his truck and taking that drive around Hawkins he had mentioned before she came into the station. Make *her* wait for *him*. The idea brought a small smile to Hopper's face.

There was a knock at his door.

He dropped the pen onto the floor. Ignoring it, he got up to answer it, forcing himself to take his time and remain calm as he pulled it open and gestured for her to come in.

"You work with such nice people," she said as she floated in, coffee

cup still in hand. "Cal has such a dry sense of humor, I love it. You think he's being completely serious, but then you catch that little glint in his eye. And Phil!" Hopper closed the door and lifted the half empty mug out of her hand, reaching over to set it on his cluttered desk- "What a cutie. It's so easy to tease him, but he takes it so well. But Flo's the mother hen around here, isn't she? She keeps things running smoothly, like a well-oiled-"

Hopper cut her off by pushing her up against the door and covering her mouth with his. Her bag fell to her feet as surprise seemed to paralyze her, but only for an instant, because she responded with just as much force in her kiss back. He held her tight against the wood with his body, pinning her arms above her head at her wrists as he massaged the soft folds of her lips with his. He could sense that she wanted control of her arms again, perhaps to wrap around him, but he held them firm and simply leaned harder into her, exacting a grunt of pleasure. His tongue probed the fleshy banks of her mouth, testing her for resistance. Finding them submissive, he moved forward, sweeping just inside the opening, teasing. She reacted by opening her mouth wider, straining her neck towards him.

He abruptly pulled away from the kiss, her mouth still searching for his, sorry to have it end too soon. She gazed up at him, panting, her eyes heavy with hunger as his burned into hers.

"Wha...what was that for?" she breathed.

"You were supposed to call me," he rumbled. He still had her pressed to the door.

"I-I know, I'm sorry, but I needed the walk. But I'm here now, okay, to tell you what...what Murphy said. About my car. Are you going to let me go?"

"What'd he say?" Hopper insisted without budging.

Anne looked down at his lips.

"Well, he, uh...he won't be able to get the part until tomorrow which means he won't be able to fix it until the day after at the latest. Uh,...I guess the parts people in Indianapolis, they only make

deliveries in the early mornings and...and all their drivers were already out by the time Murphy got in touch with them. He, um,... he said he tried other stores and garages nearby...but they either didn't have the right alternator or...or they didn't have anyone who could bring it out here. Murphy apologized to me but he couldn't leave to get it himself, too much to do at his place he said. He tried, Jim, he really did, but his hands were tied. An-and I figured it wasn't *that* big of a deal to stay an extra night or two...right? I mean if it is, I can go-

"It's fine, Anne, but just...next time call me, okay? Okay?"

She brought her gaze back up to his and nodded earnestly.

"Are you going to let me go now?" she asked in a small voice.

His mouth lifted into a smile.

"No."

Ten minutes later as Anne walked out of Hopper's office, a happy smile playing on her lips, Flo watched as she breezed through the station, giving everyone waves and calling out goodbyes. The older woman felt something strain inside her. She looked over at the Chief's office door and found him standing in it, also observing Anne's leaving. There was a lightness to his face that Flo hadn't ever seen before and she wondered, briefly, if perhaps that was what happiness looked like on Hopper. The tension didn't leave her, however, and she understood it was worry.

He hadn't meant to kiss her.

Hopper was leaning back in his chair, his feet crossed on his desk, puffing away on a cigarette. He couldn't get the kiss out of his mind. Her nervous stammering and chatter afterwards only proved to him that she had just as strong a reaction to it as he did. He had only planned on mildly upbraiding her for leaving him hanging. But all of his rebukes seemed to fly out the window when he finally got her into his office alone.

He was also anxious about that evening.

Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't give the possibility of sleeping with a woman a second thought. Either he would or wouldn't, depending on how the mood suited him, which it usually did. He rarely gave any consideration to the consequences, to what it would mean, either to him or to her.

But it was different with Anne.

And that was what worried him.

8. UNEXPECTED VISITORS

They had agreed that once Hopper's shift had ended, roughly around five, he would pick her up at the library and they'd decide what to do for dinner then. He didn't mention Flo's suggestion of having herself and Harold over because likely Anne would be all over that. But Hopper wasn't feeling up to having a dinner party. He just wanted to relax and enjoy what little time he had left in Anne's company.

When five o'clock finally rolled around, Hopper scooted out of the office as quickly and as casually as he could. Even after nightfall, it wasn't difficult for him to spot Anne's inflated form sitting on the library steps, hugging her bag to her chest. He flashed his lights at her and she jumped up and jogged to the curb where he pulled over.

"Okay, so what are we doing for food? I'm starving," she said after throwing herself inside the toasty truck. Hopper had already decided it'd be best for all involved to go out to eat instead of heading straight back to his place.

"Feel like going out? I know this pub in town, O'Malley's." It was quiet and dark and had a beef stew that was to die for.

"Sounds good."

They were seated in a secluded booth, far from the noise at the bar. They gave the waitress their drink order and sat for a few moments in silence, perusing the menu, checking out the other patrons, just sitting and relaxing in general.

"So I did some reading on your little town here," she suddenly stated.

A nervous twinge resonated in Hopper's chest.

"Oh, yeah?"

"You didn't tell me you were a local hero," she said with a smile. Hopper pulled out his pack of Camels and tapped a cigarette into his fingers.

"I thought that was obvious," he replied trying to keep his face and

voice lighthearted.

"How's the kid? The Byers kid. You ever see him or his family?"

An image of Joyce Byers at the hospital as Will recovered flashed into his mind. She had been so grateful to him, so relieved to have her boy back, and it was partly in thanks to Hopper. Things had...escalated between him and Joyce. Briefly. Their 'relationship,' if some wished to call it that, had only lasted a few weeks. He couldn't recall who realized it first, that they were only together because of what they'd been through that week and not because of any real connection. But they parted on friendly terms. Again. He hadn't really seen them since.

"Nah. Not really," he finally answered.

"But he's okay, right? That...that laboratory didn't mess with him too badly, right?"

"Yeah, he's fine."

"You know what I thought was kinda weird, though" -Hopper did his best to keep his face passive- "is that the papers that I read never talked about *how* you found him or even what actually happened to the kid. It's like it's a big secret."

He waited for the question, taking a slow drag on his cigarette.

"So? What *did* happen?"

"The investigation is still ongoing so I'm not at liberty to discuss any details of the case." He sounded like he was in front of a press conference because that's exactly what he was told to say to them or to anyone else who inquired about the case.

The corner of Anne's mouth turned down in disappointment.

"That's what I was afraid of," but then she smiled, "Pretty crazy stuff though! Bet you never thought something like that would ever happen in little old Hawkins, Indiana, right?" She picked the menu back up.

"I know you said to get the beef stew but I've got a hankering for chicken. Have you had that here?"

Hopper released the breath he had been holding and forced a smile.

If Anne had noticed Hopper's sudden mood swing, she didn't let on. She carried most of the conversation, keeping to safe topics, laughing easily, even flirting with him a little. But their discussion over the Byers case left his stomach more than just sour. He only picked at his stew and didn't object when she asked if she could finish it after her own meal was gone.

It had happened to him before. Being out with a woman or coming across some guy at a bar who had read the local newspaper stories and started asking him the same questions. Each time Hopper felt something inside him detonate and all he wanted to do was to get out of whatever place he was in and leave whoever he was with behind. It was like the case was cursed and whenever it was brought up it would cast its spell on Hopper, turning the world dark and cold again, a toxic and slime-coated mirror image of what it had been before in which, at any moment, whomever he was talking to about what happened would turn into some faceless monster or writhing eel. The only way he knew how to cope with these feelings was to escape, both physically and then mentally by means of booze and his medication.

He had excused himself after Anne had asked him about the Byers incident and went to the bathroom where he threw some cold water on his face and swallowed a Tuinal. He was down to only having a few left and knew he had to make them last until he could see his doctor again. Counting to fifty slowly, he took breaths in through his nose and out of his mouth before returning to his seat. Anne's usual cheery demeanor, along with the pill, helped ease Hopper's anxiety enough to keep him at the restaurant, planting him in his seat across from her, instead of taking off like he normally would've, that shaded plane of beasts and horror kept at bay just enough for Hopper to keep still, to breathe, to keep up with her conversation even if it was only acknowledged with a nod of his head.

He attempted a stab at being patient while they waited for the check to arrive but he couldn't disguise his restlessness; the jouncing of his

foot, the playing with the straw wrappers, the constant glances around looking for their waitress. Anne chose that moment to suddenly slide a wrinkled plastic grocery bag across the table towards him, an obvious shape sitting inside, as a self-conscious smile spied from her lips.

Hopper eyed it, puzzled.

"What's this?" he asked, making a small motion with his fingers towards the unexpected article. He was so tense he didn't think to actually open it to see.

"Look," she prodded. She seemed to hum with an excitement that made Hopper's muscles tremor. He reached for the bag dubiously.

Peering inside the sack, Hopper could see the text block of a hardcover book. He wondered if she could see his hands were trembling slightly when he pulled it out revealing it was an early edition of *A Moveable Feast* by Ernest Hemingway.

He cleared his throat to try and speak.

But he could only stare at it, mute.

Sitting there awkwardly for what was an unforgivable amount of time before he could splutter a miserably inadequate thank you, he attempted to hide his embarrassment, his mounting unease, with a quick swig of his beer and a lame, twitching smile. He witnessed a blush rise to her own cheeks.

"It's not a big deal or anything," she floundered, "Just happened to see it on a sales rack in one of the second hand shops and thought you'd might like to read it."

"No, it's great... Really... Thanks."

He may as well have doused it in lighter fluid and set a match to it right then and there for the amount of enthusiasm he conveyed. She responded with a sloppy shrug, her smile still somehow managing to stay sweet, and started playing with the straw in her water.

He couldn't tell her how much it meant to him that she had even

thought of him or that the present couldn't have been more perfect. Anxiety crippled him, rendering speech impossible, and leaving no room for any other feeling except the need to get out of O'Malley's and be home.

The ride back was silent.

He was sure she could tell something was wrong with him by now. But she didn't say a word about it. This only made him worry more.

Regret lay thick in Hopper's throat. He regretted bringing her out only to have it end up being a terrible time. He regretted letting her go off on her own that day while he worked which caused her to kill some time by doing research at the library. He regretted not telling her up front how discussing the Byers' case made him feel. He regretted how he reacted with the book.

He repeated to himself the whole drive back to Loon Pond that once they got inside the house, things would be different, that the nightmare of the last few hours would end. He would feel better and therefore act normal and he could pretend that things never went awry that evening. He kept the image of relaxing on the sofa with Anne under his arm as they watched TV at the forefront of his mind, praying to God that over the course of their dinner that night she hadn't decided that he was some manic nutcase that she needed to get as far away from as possible.

But when Hopper's mobile home came into view, he realized, as an atomic mushroom expanded in his stomach, that his nightmare was just getting started.

A familiar black Crown Victoria sat parked in his drive, two men in suits sitting inside it, waiting for him. It took all the will-power he had not to turn the truck around and speed away. He knew it would go better if he didn't fight. And he didn't want to risk anything happening to Anne.

"Whatever happens," he said in a low voice, "stay in the truck, out of sight. Lay down."

"Jim, what-"

"I said lay down!" and he pulled her padded shoulder down towards the seat.

"If something happens to me and they see you, take the truck back to the station as fast as you can, understand me? But if they don't see you, let them leave before you get out of the truck. And don't go running off, alright?"

"Yes," came her muffled reply.

Hopper drove slowly up to the parked vehicle, keeping his hand on Anne's shoulder. The man in the passenger seat got out and faced Hopper's Blazer as it made it's approach. When Hopper was still a car length's away, he stopped abruptly and jumped out before the men could get too close to his car, risking the possibility of them seeing Anne.

"Gentlemen," he said without feeling any of the politeness that is usually tacked on to such a title. Without a word, the man who stood outside the car opened the back door and climbed in, letting Hopper take the front seat.

As they edged past his Chevy, Hopper looked to see if he could spot Anne. He relaxed slightly as they continued their drive out, the cab of his truck appearing empty of any passengers. He hoped she would use the keys to get into his house and wait for him there, hidden and safe with the arsenal at the bottom of his bedroom closet.

They detained him for only three hours this time.

Apparently the sudden appearance of a strange woman in town who just as suddenly becomes cozy with the Chief alarmed the higher ups on the government program responsible for what happened to Byers. They wanted to make sure Hopper hadn't forgotten his agreement with them, that this new person wasn't going to be making any waves like selling information to the Soviets or writing an article for the Washington Post. Hopper's assurances that Anne knew nothing and was simply making her way through town did little to comfort the agents. They had already done a full background check on her and nothing had come up that raised any red flags, but the Soviets had people on the inside who were just as capable of tampering with a

document or bribing an official as they were. They were going to be keeping their eyes on them.

When they brought Hopper back, he waited until they had driven out of sight before running to his truck.

Anne wasn't inside.

The keys were gone as well.

He wouldn't have been surprised to find she had taken off after his behavior at dinner and then when seeing the men from the lab. But what if the suits had seen her after all? Would they have sent men back to his house to pick her up? Or worse?

He charged up his front steps calling her name. The whole house was dark, not even the porch light was on, making his single wide look more like a Nephilim's coffin than a home.

When he found his door locked he allowed himself a small grain of consolation as he set to banging on it with his fist, yelling her name louder. There was no sign of an intrusion. She could've secured herself safely inside, right?

The living room light suddenly cut through the darkness.

"Jim?!" came her frantic reply from the other side of the door as she unfastened the chain. The cold sweep of resounding relief flooded over him at hearing her voice. The moment the door opened Hopper burst inside then slammed it closed behind him, re-locking it. When he turned back around to face her, she threw her arms around his neck.

"What happened?! Who were those men?! What did they want with you?! Did they hurt you, are you alright?!" A spray of questions fountaining out of her mouth as she clung to him.

In those few moments of holding her against him, gasping relieved breaths that she was alright, Hopper could feel nothing else but comfort.

He didn't allow himself very long to enjoy it.

Prying her hands away from around his neck, he began the job of lessening the severity of what had happened to him.

"I'm fine, I'm fine, it was nothing, just a routine meeting with the men in charge of special government cases. I'm sorry I made you worry, I thought they were somebody else when I first saw them. But everything's alright, okay?" She stood looking up at him with wide eyes, her mouth open in disbelief.

"That...that's normal?"

"Well, I don't know how *normal* it is, but it's usual. They take themselves too seriously if you ask me. But you're okay, right? Not too badly shaken up?"

"Shaken up? I was terrified! I thought something horrible happened to you! The way you acted in the truck, it was like you were dealing with the mafia or something!" She collapsed on the couch, throwing her arm over her eyes. When he retreated into the kitchen to grab a couple of beers from the fridge, he noticed his hands were shaking. Sneaking another Tuinal, Hopper popped open one of the cans and emptied half of it where he stood. He offered the other to Anne who still lay out on the couch like an old Hollywood actress.

It was when she reached for the can from his outstretched hand that he saw she had tears running down her cheeks.

Dropping to the floor beside her, he hastily set her drink aside and folded his hands over hers.

"Aw, Annie, I'm sorry. Please...please don't cry."

"I can't help it, I was so scared, Jim. And then so relieved you were back and nothing bad happened to you. And now I'm angry that you made me think you were being tortured!" She pulled her hand away as fresh tears swam down her face.

"Don't be mad...I'm sorry...I shouldn't have done that to you...I'm so, so, sorry." He had managed to cajole her hand back into his and laid a few kisses on it showing how repentant he really was.

She sat up and wiped her face with the inside of her blouse, her

snowsuit and winter gear having been shed while she waited for him to come back. As he looked at her with a beseeching gaze, his fingers gently caressing her trapped hand, her face lightened a little and her eyes started to clear.

He smiled the first real smile he felt over the last few hours and planted one last kiss on the back of her hand.

"Next time," she hiccuped, "you better be tortured." And she grabbed the beer he had originally offered her from off the floor and threw it back in a heavy gulp.

9. THE MONSTER RETURNS

Hopper took a long, hot shower in hopes that it would help calm any frayed nerves he had left before heading off to bed. Anne had passed out on the couch fairly quickly after finishing her beer, the stress of the last few hours no doubt having taken their toll on her as well. She had told him how, once the car he was taken away in had vanished, she had considered going directly to the police station or even following them. But she reminded herself that he had told her not to 'run off' and she wanted to be there when he got back. She hadn't spoken the 'if,' but he could feel it linger behind her lips, an unspoken thought she preferred to keep lifeless.

So she high-tailed it into the mobile home, making sure every window and door was locked, turned off all of the lights, and sat on his bedroom floor, the baseball bat in her lap. She described the time she spent waiting for him as a slow death, an asphyxiation of an interminable amount of hours. But she could do nothing else.

Hopper waited as she spoke, her head resting against his thigh as he sat on the end of the sofa and she lay stretched down its length, his arm slung out across the top of the back cushions, a smoking cigarette in his fingers. He listened to her retellings of her experience slow and slur before she drifted into sleep and when he was sure she was out, he got up to shower.

As he stood under the stream, he went over every reason he could he think of why Anne's leaving soon would be for the best. After experiencing what just happened with the government agents, what they said concerning her, Hopper could only see trouble ahead if she stayed much longer. It made his gut twist to think they were watching them. Watching *her*. No, the farther away Anne Garrett got from Hawkins, Indiana, the better off she'd be.

After finishing up in the bathroom, he snuck by her on the couch, her light snoring as she lay hidden somewhere under the blanket assuring him that she was still fast asleep. The night was early yet for Hopper, but he needed the time to try and relax the stress out of his body. The evening's events still had him far too geared up to even hope for gaining some shut-eye within the next several hours. So first he

would have to settle down, to unwind the barbed coil that sat like a millstone in his chest.

Leaving the lamp on, as was his norm, he lay back onto his bed with a smoke and picked up Anne's gift, careful to keep his cigarette's ash from snowing on the worn dust jacket. He flipped to the first chapter and read the opening line, a typically Hemingway sentence, in medias res and negative: "Then there was the bad weather."

Ernie really had no idea.

He was alone at Joyce's house. But it wasn't really her house. The walls and furniture were covered with pulsating, gelatinous seaweed-like tendrils and the air was thick with what looked like floating ash.

Hopper wasn't wearing a hazmat suit and he could feel the poisonous atmosphere as it attacked his lungs and skin. He didn't know how he ended up there, but he knew he had to find Will before he could leave.

A light was on in one of the bedrooms down the hall. He could barely see it through the dusty air, the darkness that seemed to swallow him. His gun was too heavy in his hand making his arm hang limp with it at his side, powerless to defend himself against the monster. But he had to go in that room. He was sure Will would be there.

Moving like he was walking through thick swamp mud, Hopper trudged down the hall in slow motion. He felt so weak, like he would collapse any moment, and he was freezing. He never felt so heavy in his life as he inched along, dragging one foot after the other. But he had to hurry. The monster was close and it knew where he was.

When Hopper finally made it to the bedroom, he saw a mound of throbbing coils collected on the bed, a form underneath them. Stumbling forward, blindly groping for the mattress where Will lay, Hopper heard an unearthly growl coming from the wall behind the headboard. Heart racing, panting for the air his lungs couldn't seem to find, Hopper tore at the mass of slimy cords writhing on the body before him. A grotesque figure began to stretch through the wall, the guttural noises growing louder as the monster ripped through the plaster.

Hopper worked frantically, his hands numb and practically useless as he dug, trying to reach the kid underneath the alien tissue that slipped off the bed and slithered away with eerie shrieks. The monster's claws broke free from the barrier and reached for him, just out of range of his head. Hopper felt like his arms were made of lead as he snatched wildly through the squirming pile, but he was getting closer to Will's inert frame.

Yanking the last of the tentacles off, Hopper froze.

It wasn't Will underneath, but Anne. Pale as death, frozen, covered in ooze.

The monster lunged free from the wall covering her in darkness.

He was shouting. The room was dark and the monster was there.

Flailing, trying to tear the sheet and blanket from his heaving, burning body, when he awoke, Hopper had upset the lamp on his nightstand. It had fallen to the floor with a crunch, draping the room in black and bringing his nightmare to life.

He was struggling with the drawer to the end table, his hands soaked in sweat and his fingers forgetting how to work properly when grasping objects. He didn't realize it but he was still screaming as he groped for his flashlight, for the pistol.

The monster was in the room.

Suddenly the place was flooded with light and Hopper found himself crouched on the floor beside his bed, someone next to him, shaking him, saying his name.

His eyes finally focused on Anne's face, the panicked look in her eyes, on her mouth as she yelled. He had to save her.

"It's in here!" he heard himself shout repeatedly as he battled for his legs to lift him. But he only made it to the top of his mattress, Anne shoving him to sit down. She perched herself at his side, trying to pass her cool hands over his face to wipe the sweat and tears that soaked his skin and calm him.

"Nothing's in here, Jim. You're safe," she was saying. But he fought against her ministrations, still submerged in the terror of his dream. The room seemed to be spinning around him. He pulled away, lunging for his nightstand again.

He wanted his pills.

The plastic vial was loose in his grip as he fought with the cap, his hands trembling so badly he could hear the remaining capsules dance inside the bottle. The container seemed to burst in his fist, the little red and blue tablets falling away into the void of his messy room. He shouted a curse and began pawing through the stuff on the floor, desperate to find one of the pills.

He hadn't realized she had left him until he saw her come back into his room, a glass of water and a washcloth in her hands. Prying him up off the floor and back onto the bed, she pressed the cold, damp cloth to his forehead, his neck, his shoulders. She forced him to drink the water, ignoring that a lot of it dribbled out of the corner of his mouth down his chin. All the while she kept saying in a soothing tone,

"It's alright, Jim. You're safe."

Gradually his mind climbed out of the pit. As the shadows receded, Hopper strained to accept it had been another nightmare and that they weren't in danger, that the monster wasn't really there. But he was still whirling in a pool of panic, on the cusp of being sucked under. He couldn't get control of his breathing, his heart felt like it would pound out of his chest.

"Lay down, Jim," he heard her say, but her voice sounded like she was underwater, "Come on. On your stomach." She was guiding him down onto the bed, ignoring the feeble protests that he was making. He wouldn't be able to relax, much less sleep, couldn't she see that? He was still drowning, the nightmares would only return, the monster would come, he didn't have his Tuinal, the men in the black cars were outside.

She stretched him out on his mattress, his arms clasping a pillow under his chin. Despite feeling like his body was on fire, he was

shaking like he'd been caught outside without a coat on. He felt her sit on her knees at the side of his hip. He wanted to jump up, to tear out of there, to take his firearm and find those miserable, sons of-

But suddenly she was running her hands up his back, pressing and rubbing the muscles as she slid her palms all the way up to the rear of his skull, then all the way back down to his waistband, all in a slow, firm motion.

"Listen to my voice, okay? Just focus on what I'm saying... and let yourself follow my hands...on your skin... Good. That's good.

"You know what I miss the most about Florida?... The beaches... We lived not far from one growing up, just a bus trip away... During the summer... I would take my sister, Diana, with me for a day... We'd pack a lunch and a big, old yellow blanket... This one particular beach... the sand was so fine and soft... it felt like baby oil on our feet... Di and I liked to be close to the wall of rocks that stretched out into the water... We'd climb all over it, looking for treasure in the cracks... And we'd sit... right on the edge... so that with each rolling wave... the salt water would spray us..." She was manipulating her hands and fingers along with her story, drawing the pictures on his skin; the yellow beach blanket was smoothed out in a square with her palms, she fluttered the tips of her fingers for the softness of the sand, the wall of rocks were her balled fists as she dragged them up his spine, and she gently kneaded the movement of the waves down his sides.

"We loved the ocean... We walked up the beach... ankle-deep in the surf... the wet sand squishing through our toes... listening to the pounding waves... and then they would sizzle... as they were dragged away again... Nothing smelled as good to us as the ocean... The wind carried the sea-air on its back... played with our hair... and we would smell it on our clothes... the whole ride home...

"On one of our trips... the water was so calm... you could float on your back... and barely move... Laying there... in the cool water... the sun warming my skin... I forgot that I wasn't in heaven... I just let the movements of the ocean rock me... into a sort of trance..." Anne's voice was getting softer as she spoke. Hopper barely registered that the pressure she had been applying had slowly diminished until she

was just lightly brushing her hands and fingertips across his body and through his hair, caressing him like a mother would to soothe a child. She had adjusted her seat so that she was on her butt, her legs crooked at her side, leaning one arm down on the bed to hold her up as she continued her stroking.

"We used to pretend we were mermaids... and swim through the water with our feet locked together... like they were our tail fins... My hair was short then, but Di, she had the most beautiful, long blonde hair... and she'd let it fan out around her shoulders in the water and I'd pretend to be a sailor trying to coax her to land with me...

A moment of silence. Then,

"We'd spend the whole day at the beach... exhausting ourselves in the waves, and the sun, and the wind."

He had been lulled to the edge of sleep. Before slipping over it, he felt her creep down beside him, curling herself against his side, still running her hand gingerly over his back until there was nothing but the sound of waves in his ears and a vision of Anne leading him into the water.

10. THE PHONE CALL

When Hopper woke again, he could feel Anne there beside him, under his arm. He opened his eyes lazily and found himself looking at the back of her head, her hair close enough for him to smell it. Craning his neck, he checked to see if she was asleep.

The lamp on the other nightstand was on casting its light directly on her face and fighting the darkness that still reigned outside the windows. Her eyes were closed, her breathing peaceful and rhythmic. Lifting his arm off her side, Hopper checked his watch.

Just after three.

He gently laid it back over her, inching himself closer to her sleeping frame. Fitting himself neatly against her body, he buried his nose ever so carefully into her mane, taking deep breaths of her scent. Fighting the urge to move her glossy tendrils aside so he could assail her neck with kisses, Hopper contented himself with just feeling her against him, breathing her in.

He had had a nightmare before with a woman; once with Joyce, three times afterward with different girls, all of whom took cover and/or split during his episode. Joyce, who had her own bad dreams, had tried to be soothing when it happened. She had hung on to him, weeping, begging Hopper to stop, feeding him his pill and booze. Her kids had woken up. He never slept over her house again. He didn't want to put them all through it when they were dealing with the same problems as he was. They needed someone stable they could lean on, someone strong.

His arm tightened around Anne's waist involuntarily.

They needed someone like Anne.

Sighing, Hopper looked up at the light on the other side of her head. It seemed so harsh at that moment that he wondered if she could really sleep comfortably with it shining in her eyes like that. He could tolerate the darkness for a few hours, he realized, if she was with him.

Lifting himself up on his elbow, Hopper reached over Anne towards the lamp, ready to grant her a little peace as she had done for him. But her hand arrested his before it made it near the shade.

"Leave it."

It startled him, the sudden movement and hearing her voice, having believed she was asleep and he cast his eyes down at her in surprise.

She was looking up at him, a yearning in her gaze that made his heart stumble.

"I don't mind it on," she murmured.

Then, with her eyes still locked onto his, she slowly brushed her hand up from his wrist, along his arm, over his shoulder until she was holding his cheek against her palm, her thumb lightly stroking his lips. He could feel his desire surge through him, laboring his breathing.

For a moment he hovered over her, still unsure, until she gently shifted herself so that she was lying on her back underneath him, sliding her hands over his shoulders invitingly. Swallowing, Hopper lowered himself until just before their lips could meet, their breaths brushing.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked hoarsely, praying to God she wouldn't say no.

Her answer was in her kiss, meeting his mouth the rest of the way in eager, greedy contact. He inhaled through his nose sharply as he felt the craving in her lips and tongue. Pulling him down on top of her, she locked her legs around his hips, demanding more of him.

Their hunger for each other was powerful, unfulfilled desire having been planted and growing rapidly over that past twenty four hours, culminating into this frenzied passion. It seemed that neither of them could be satisfied quick enough.

Afterward, Hopper lay gasping on top of her, listening to her own panting, sure the next thing to do was spoon and fall asleep. But when he went to lift himself off of her, her limbs constricted around

his body, keeping him where he was.

"Don't move. Not yet," she said in a breathy voice. Complying, Hopper relaxed back onto her, prompting a contented groan from her throat. Resting his forehead on her pillow, he listened as his pounding heart eased to a lower rhythm, feeling his skin cool where she was exhaling.

But then her mouth began moving along the side of his neck. She whispered his name salaciously as she pushed her hips against his. That's all it took for him to move into round two.

By the end of the third round, Hopper was so exhausted, he could barely move when they were done. Anne climbed off of him, collapsing at his side. His limbs were liquid, warm and weightless, as he lay there huffing like he'd just run a marathon. She slipped over to him on her stomach, slinging an arm around his waist and laying her face on his abdomen, a smile peeking up at him.

"I told myself not to sleep with you," she said.

He had his arm behind his head, his other hand began gliding up and down the back of her shoulder as he gazed down at her laughing grin.

"Good advice," he replied. And then seriously, "You probably should've listened to it."

"No regrets, Jim. They're not allowed." Her smile didn't fade as she looked steadily at him.

"I'm not regretting this, not yet anyway. But you will."

"Perhaps," she granted him, "But I know I would've regretted *not* doing it."

She laid a kiss on his stomach.

"Enough. Time for sleep," she said flipping over on to her back and sidling up next to him.

"Can you sleep with the light on?"

"After all that we just did, I can sleep through anything."

When morning finally came beckoning through the shades of his bedroom, Hopper woke with the wish that he didn't need to go into work. He looked over at Anne as she lay on her side facing him, her hands tucked underneath the pillow. Her hair was spilled across her cheek, veiling the lower half of her face. He couldn't resist swiping it aside with the crook of his finger. The movement roused her, but she gave him a sleepy smile when she saw him.

"Sorry, didn't mean to wake you."

"S'okay," she croaked as she stretched like a cat.

"How'd you sleep?"

"Mm, like the dead. And you, too, I think."

"Yeah."

"I don't think I'm ready to get up yet," she yawned, closing her eyes.

"I have to be to work in a few hours," he lamented.

"It's not fair."

She snuggled down deeper under the sheet, the blanket having been cast to the floor hours before during their frantic cavorting.

"C'mere," Hopper said, lifting his arm. She burrowed against his chest and he closed his arm around her, rubbing the chill from her back. Tucking her head under his chin, she nestled against him with a happy sigh. Her skin was cool on his and he wondered how in the world she was going to survive the northern Michigan weather. But that called to mind the fact that she was going to be leaving soon. The thought made him grimace, a painful pricking feeling attacking his chest.

"You okay?" she suddenly asked.

"Huh? Why?"

"I just felt you tense up. Am I too cold?" and she made like she was going to pull away, but Hopper only tightened his hold on her.

"Nah, I'm fine, I'm fine. I just wish... we had more time."

"We can't think about it," she said softly. He could feel her mouth or chin move against his chest as she spoke.

"I mean... do you have to go right away? If your brother's not expecting you, then... you could show up whenever you wanted, right?"

She sighed heavily.

"It's... more complicated than that, Jim-"

"Alright, alright," he soothed, regretting having even brought up the idea of her prolonging her stay. Of course, she couldn't. She had a life she had to move on with. A life that didn't involve Hawkins, Indiana or him. "I've just...really enjoyed your being here."

"Me, too."

"Even before the sex."

"Naturally."

They both laughed.

After a few moments, he heard her take a breath. Then, "Just...don't forget me, Jim, okay? Don't forget any of this."

He pulled his head back enough to find her eyes.

"Why would you think that I could?"

A sadness crept into her gaze.

"It happens." He kept his look steady on her, waiting for more of an explanation than that.

She relented. "My mother... the last couple years of her life she didn't know who I was. I lived with her, took care of her day in and day

out, and she'd look at me like I was a stranger, asking me my name and what I was doing there. She'd ask for Gilbert, always wanted Gilbert. And she always seemed to recognize Diana when she visited. It was very hard for me to live with knowing she had no clue who I was even though I was there all the time and doing everything for her. To be erased like that, like I didn't matter when she was my whole life for so long, it was...unbearable."

"I'm sorry."

She nudged her head to the side as a shrug.

"I promise I won't forget," he finished. He lifted her chin up with his finger and pressed his lips to hers softly. Her response felt shy, unsure, so Hopper slid his hand up to her cheek, taking his mouth away so he could graze her pout with the pad of his thumb a couple of times before returning his lips for more. He kept his kisses slow and gentle, treating her mouth like it was fragile and precious. When he introduced his tongue, he kept it light, just skimming the tender mounds of velvet flesh. She whined with a mixture of satisfaction and of wanting more. When he felt her hand traveling down his ribs, he caught it and used it to push her onto her back, moving easily on top of her, his mouth never stopping its fondling of hers.

Where the last three times were fevered and desperate, this time was unhurried and delicate, each of them savoring each other, stirring themselves slowly. Hopper wanted her to know how much the last couple of days meant to him, that she was an amazing woman whom he could never forget. He touched her like he was handling the female form for the first time, marveling as he ran his hands along her skin, behaving like what she was giving him, allowing him to do was the greatest honor a person could receive. His mouth was how he paid homage to her, a tribute in every caress, every kiss, every sweep of his tongue. His reward was making her breathless and cry out.

In the end, when they were both sated and dazed, their bodies spent, she looked up at the ceiling, winded, and said,

"That was...incredible." He couldn't help a cocky smile.

They lay in silence, exhausted. Hopper's eyes began to droop and he

didn't fight the drowsiness that blanketed him. He dozed off, swathed in euphoria.

Something startled him awake some time later. He looked for Anne, but found the bed empty of her. He was about to call her name when he heard her voice speaking low in the living room. It sounded like she was talking to someone.

Hopper checked his watch and found it was closing in on 7:30.

Pulling on his pants, he crept to the door and cracked it an inch, confused who could possibly be at his place at this time of the morning. Anne was sitting on the couch, her back to him, the blanket draped around her body. She was on the telephone.

"...I guess it's better than the alternative," she was saying, a resigned tone to her voice. Pause. She turned her face slightly, eyeing the bedroom door. Hopper leaned back. "No, he has no idea. And it's been hard keeping it from him... Well, I've run into a...complication, but nothing I can't take care of... I appreciate it. I'll let you know. I'll report back in when I can... Goodbye, doctor." And she hung up the receiver with an unhappy sigh.

Hopper stole back to bed, flinging his jeans off as quickly as he could. His mind was racing with his heart as he listened to her come back into the bedroom, moving quietly. Who was this doctor she was talking to on the phone so early in the morning? What was she keeping from him? What complication? Thoughts were reeling in his brain.

Instead of climbing back into bed, he felt her hover beside him. He wondered that she couldn't hear his heart pounding behind his ribcage. But then he felt her stroke his face and plant a kiss on his forehead.

"Jim. You gotta get up. It's after 7:30, you're gonna be late for work." He opened his eyes as if for the first time that morning and forced a smile. She was fully dressed, the blanket still wrapped around her shoulders.

"Morning," he said.

"I'll make some coffee." He watched her float back out into the living room before he slid from the bed, pushing the cloudy uncertainty from his mind, fighting to ignore the flitting doubts that were peppering his thoughts.

11. THE INVESTIGATION

She acted the same, as if no phone call was made. There were a few times he had nearly asked her about it, but he bit his lip every time, telling himself it was none of his business and he shouldn't be making a big deal out of it. There had to be a reasonable explanation but if he let on that he was eavesdropping on her and then demanded to know who she was talking to, she'd probably get angry at him, call him paranoid. Which he was. But this was *Anne*. He had nothing to worry about... Right?

Round and round Hopper went. One second she was innocent of any wrongdoing, the next he pegged her for a government agent. Finally he told himself to forget about it. Anne was the last person he needed to be suspicious of.

Before going in to work she helped him scour his bedroom floor for the few Tuinal that he had dropped. The first one he found he dry swallowed in front of her, but she said nothing. The last two he replaced back in the bottle and shoved it in his pocket.

She went in with him again, said she'd watch a double feature, maybe find a ride to a nearby mall or something. He didn't like the idea of her being on her own again, especially after what the suits said to him the previous night. But he didn't argue against it. It's not like she could stay with him at the station all day. Untamed thoughts of having her on his desk, against the door, in the single holding cell, flooded Hopper's mind. He'd be distracted the whole time, her being so close and him not being able to act on any of his lascivious thoughts. No work would get done.

He dropped her off at a mom and pop diner near the center of town so she could have breakfast and be able to walk to where she needed to go afterwards. He wished he could've joined her, but he was already late and he didn't need any lip from Flo. She was probably going to give him the death stare as it was.

"Did Miss Garrett go home yet?" Flo asked almost immediately after Hopper walked into the station.

"Nah, she's still around. Any calls, Flo?" He charged to the coffee urn where a box of muffins sat looking pitiful and unwanted.

"No. Would you two want to come over for dinner tonight? I'm making pork chops."

Hopper turned to her, the head of the muffin wedged in his mouth, his brow furrowed. He pulled the pastry out from between his teeth, no bite taken.

"You want to have us over for dinner? Tonight?"

"Wouldn't you like a nice home cooked meal, Hop?"

"Well, yeah, but..." he paused as he looked at her, the wheels in his head turning. "Flo, what's going on? Why are you so keen about Anne and I for a meal? First it was yesterday with coming to my place for dinner, now it's your place."

"Oh, it's nothing to get worked up about, Hop, it was just an idea. I like the girl is all. And it's the first girl I've seen you with that made you look... I don't know. Happy?"

So there it was. Flo thought he and Anne were an item and was encouraging the love match the only way she knew how: through food.

"Okay. Flo. Anne and I... we're not... together, alright? She's just some girl passing through town. So... thanks for the dinner invite, but... we're good." He stuffed the muffin back into his mouth and took his coffee with him to his office.

At lunch time, Hopper thought it'd be a good idea to maybe locate Anne and take her for a bite to eat. He figured she was probably tired and cold from doing God knows what all day and could use the break. What he didn't admit was that he really just missed her and felt the need to check up on her.

He found her at the movie theatre in the middle of her second viewing of *Sudden Impact*.

"You gotta love Clint Eastwood," she said as they walked back to his

truck.

"He does play a pretty hot cop, right?" he replied with an impish grin.

"Sure. But, I've seen hotter." And she slapped his rear with a playful smile, darting away before he could return the gesture.

He took her to a local sub shop and selected a small table by the window for them to eat their lunch at. As they dug into their sandwiches, Hopper brought up Flo's invitation to dinner.

"Aw, that was nice of her," was Anne's response, "Are we gonna go?"

"I said no, but I guess we could if you really wanted to. But she's doing it because she thinks...well, she thinks we should be together," and he attempted to laugh it off like the very thought was too ridiculous to take seriously. He thought her face sobered slightly, but she managed a small smile.

"Funny, right?" he prodded, giving his head a small shake.

"Yeah. Funny." She took a sip of her soda. "I mean, you're probably the last person who would want to give up the whole bachelor lifestyle just to settle down again, right?" she snorted.

"Well, I mean,... I-I *would*... if the right girl came along."

"She'd have to be pret-ty spectacular to deal with your grumpy keister."

"You seem to handle it pretty well."

She stopped giggling. He hadn't meant to discuss things with her in a stupid sandwich place, but it happened.

"Anne-"

At that moment, a glob of marinara sauce from her chicken parm splattered onto the front of her snowsuit. Hastily putting her sub down, she began swiping at the stain with the flimsy napkins the restaurant provided.

"Oh, man, I'm gonna smell like tomatoes! Hold that thought. I'm gonna run to the bathroom and try to wash this mess off, but I'll be. Right. Back." And she escaped to the ladies' room.

Hopper nervously waited for her to return, wondering what the heck he was going to say to her. It's not like he could ask her to stay in Hawkins. And he wasn't going to be moving anywhere. He foresaw the government boys not liking that idea.

So what was he thinking could possibly happen?

His inner monologue was interrupted when he noticed Patrick Murphy walk in to pick up his lunch.

"Oh, hey, Hop!" he greeted when Hopper waved to him.

Then, purely to make conversation, Hopper asked, "How's the car coming along?"

Murphy frowned.

"Car? You mean Miss Garrett's car?"

"Well, yeah."

"She didn't tell you I had it fixed yesterday?"

Hopper felt the blood drain from his face.

"What?"

"Yeah. The car's been done since I got the part yesterday morning. I told her when she came by that it'd be done before noon, but when she came back she told me she was planning on staying a couple of extra days. Had something to do, she said. I figured she meant with you. But she paid for it, so she can come by anytime and pick it up." Murphy was handed his food and he paid before saying goodbye to the stunned Chief.

She had lied to him.

A deep coldness settled onto him freezing his bones.

Yesterday in his office, he had thought she was acting nervous and doing her 'prattling' because of the kiss, but it was because she was lying.

She lied.

What else has she lied about?

His stomach was suddenly on fire, the shock of betrayal eating him from the inside out. Then that phone call that morning, there was something going on, something she wasn't tell him, something she was lying about.

Hopper had been played for the fool. Anger was quickly overwriting his hurt at being deceived. He groped for his bottle of pills and threw one back, barely able to swallow it because he was so tense.

Bile rose in his throat when she returned to the table, a smile on her face.

"Now," she said as she sat down, "What were you saying?"

"Huh? Oh. Nothing."

A crease appeared between her eyebrows.

"You weren't... going to tell me something before I spilled food all over me?"

He shook his head, the corners of his mouth turned downward like he didn't know what she was talking about. The disappointment that flitted in her eyes made something in his chest throb painfully.

"I need to head back to the station. Do you need a ride anywhere?"

Of course she didn't, her car was fine, she could take it wherever she needed to go.

He was already standing, gathering up his trash.

He could see the confusion on her face, the question dangling from her lips. But she said nothing, only wrapped up the rest of her sub

and followed him out to the truck. She stopped as he opened his door to climb in, standing in front of the nose of the Blazer.

"I think I'll... just walk from here. Okay? Shall I come to the station when your shift ends?"

"Yeah. Okay. Five."

She hesitated.

"Is everything alright, Jim?"

He felt something inside him soften a little as he looked at the way she waited for him to answer her, concern written on her features. Clamping his jaw together, Hopper shook his head.

"Everything's fine, Anne. See you at five." And he climbed into the cab, slamming the door closed.

He made a couple of phone calls, trying to do his own background check on her. The police station in Groveland had no criminal record of any Anne Garrett, but they had been called on a Gilbert Garrett about ten years back for physical violence committed on his sisters and mother at their home. Apparently no charges were filed. They were also contacted a month ago by Anne to report the death of her mother at their residence. Otherwise, there was nothing else on her.

He placed calls to the neighbors, getting only one home who had nothing bad to say about the Garrett's, but admitted not knowing any of them too well despite having lived next door to them for four years.

Hitting a wall, Hopper decided the next step was to take a look through her car.

He asked Murphy to pull the car into an empty garage bay so he could take a look at it without the fear of having Anne seeing him.

He didn't let himself barrel through her things, tearing through it all like it was his own trash. But he methodically removed one box or bag at a time, sifted through the contents, before returning it to the vehicle. He found clothes, kitchenware, books, and plenty of knick-

knacks or home decor, but nothing incriminating. When he came across shoeboxes full of family photos, he flipped through a few but had to stop after a while. Seeing Anne as a child and growing up, with her family, it was all too much for him. It was making him feel guilty for invading her privacy, though he knew he had good reason for it.

By the time he was finished with her car, Hopper began second guessing himself. Maybe he was overreacting after all. There could be a reasonable explanation as to why she lied to him about her car not being fixed. And the morning phone conversation could have had nothing to do with him.

But he had to check one more thing out before he could let her off the hook again, before he could be satisfied that there was nothing amiss with Anne Garrett.

She showed up at his office ten minutes to five. He could hear her talking to the guys and Flo out in the lobby, hear them laughing. His stomach boiled to think she could've fooled them all so easily.

"Ready to go?" he asked as casually as he could when he appeared, pulling on his jacket. She was.

They gave their goodbyes and headed out.

"So," he said as they drove along Route 421, "Did you see Murphy about your car? Is it ready or will it be tomorrow?"

"Actually... I didn't talk to him today. I... was kind of avoiding the garage. But I'll call him in the morning."

Hopper unclenched his jaw so he could speak.

"Why were you avoiding it?"

She lifted a shoulder. "Guess I'm not too keen on leaving just yet. Why? Are you so anxious to be rid of me?" She had kept her gaze out of her window, the question sounding distant and serious.

He hoped she didn't notice he was gripping the steering wheel like he was twisting someone's neck. But he had to play it cool.

"Nah, of course not."

What was killing him was that despite the recent developments indicating that she couldn't be trusted, or in the very least had *a lot* of explaining to do, he still didn't want her to go. There was a grain of hope still slivered within him that he wouldn't discover anything else about her that would show she wasn't who she said she was, that she wasn't a threat to him after all. But he wouldn't know for sure until he could search her overnight bag and then question her about the phone call and her car.

They had their left over Chinese food for dinner, an awkward silence between them as they ate on the couch. He had the TV on to try and gloss over the strain that had developed, but it only seemed to highlight the fact.

More than once he caught her looking at him, a sort of worried expectancy carved in her face. He could only force a smile at her and turn away, pretending to be absorbed with the episode of *MASH* that was playing.

As much as he needed to know the truth, he was at the same time dreading it. She had gone into the bathroom to change into her pajamas, wash her face, and brush her teeth and he had every opportunity to ransack her bag while she was doing so, but he kept on stalling.

When she came back out she flopped on the couch, he noticed she chose the far end, and proceeded to study him.

"Something's up with you."

She was wearing her long nightshirt without the sweatpants and Hopper angrily felt a longing stir within him as he brushed his eyes over her bare legs.

"Just tired," he replied, returning his attention back to the television.

"We were pretty...active last night," she allowed, picking at the hem of her shirt. He took a drink of his beer instead of replying. He didn't want to think about last night.

"I'll stay out here tonight, then, let you get a full night's rest. Better lock your door just to be safe, too." Her attempt to lighten the atmosphere almost worked, but the aching Hopper was feeling was now mixed with desire and he could only manage half a smile. It was their last night together. Having her stay on the couch while he slept alone in his bedroom was the last way he meant to spend it if you had asked him that morning.

"Probably a good idea," he muttered. She had no clue how close he was to taking her right there on the couch despite the mountain of doubts he had about her. He stood quickly, erasing the thought from his mind.

"I'm gonna turn in now actually."

"You are? But it's only seven thirty." The protest in her voice made him hesitate. She was killing him.

Without looking at her for fear it would make him cave in, Hopper took a deep breath and replied,

"Yeah, but, I'm really tired, Anne. I need to go to bed."

"Alright. Well,... goodnight then, Jim."

He walked like a man half-dead to his bedroom and closed the door behind him.

He locked it.

As tired as he was, sleep did not bless Hopper that night except in intermittent blinks. There were a few times he nearly burst from his room to interrogate her, ending the suspense once and for all before he drove himself insane thinking and re-thinking about it. Instead, he lay in his bed either staring at the ceiling or gazing at his bracelet, thinking how much Sarah would've liked Anne. Except if she hadn't died, he'd have never met Anne. The idea of never having her come into his life was so foreign to him now. Yet he knew he would've given up the possibility if it meant having his baby girl with him for just one more day. His thoughts seemed to be in a vortex of anger and suffering, neither conducive to sleep.

By the time morning decided to show up, Hopper was in such a state of melancholy and bitterness, he almost couldn't bring himself to get out of bed. However, he did, forcing on his jeans and dragging himself out his door.

She was sitting on the couch, still in her pajamas, reading *The Old Man and the Sea* again, a cup of coffee resting on her knee in her hand. She looked up at him as he came in, passing an uncertain smile. He could see she hadn't slept well herself, her eyes red and swollen, dark circles underneath them. He returned the smile painfully.

"There's coffee," she said throatily.

"I'll need it."

He chose to bring his filled mug back to the couch and sit by her, but not too closely, while he drank it. Almost the second he sat down, she got up with a stretch and she said,

"I'm gonna hop in the shower real quick. Do you need the bathroom?"

He told her he didn't and furtively watched her go through her bag to retrieve her toiletries and clothes, before heading to the bathroom. He was done stalling. He had to find out now if there was anything she had hidden in her massive sack.

He waited until he heard the shower turn on before he set his coffee onto the table and dropped to the floor to snag her bag, pulling it towards him. He didn't realize it, but he was repeating to himself over and over,

"Please don't find anything. Please don't find anything."

But he did.

Laying at the bottom, wrapped in soft cloth, was a Colt M1911 pistol, a full magazine, and a box of .45 ACP cartridges.

Hopper leaned back on his heels, his lungs suddenly faulty, a cold sweat standing out on his skin. He almost wept.

It was the same type of firearm the men at the lab used.

12. STRONG ENOUGH

He waited for her at the kitchen table, a cigarette burning between his fingers, her gun laying in his lap. He took his last final minutes before the door to the bathroom finally opened and she appeared dressed in the clothes he had first seen her in, rubbing her dampened hair with a towel. When she saw him at the table, she stopped, seeming to register that something wasn't right. He couldn't look at her.

"Jim... what's wrong?"

Taking a drag, Hopper drove his gaze to hers.

"Who are you?"

Her head jerked back in confusion.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Enough with the games, Anne." He welcomed the anger that was building inside him. Anything to overpower the incredible sense of loss he was experiencing.

"What games? Jim, what are you talking about?"

Something broke inside of him.

He slammed her firearm onto the table.

"Wanna tell me why you're carrying around a semi-automatic pistol in your bag?!"

The rage in his voice and face actually startled her, making her flinch. She looked at her gun, but her face kept the mask of bewilderment.

"You... you went through my bag? Why would you do that?"

He rose sharply from his seat and leaned forward onto his hands.

"I will ask you one more time. Who. Are you?"

"What do- I don't understand! I'm Anne! Anne Garrett! Jim, what is the matter with you?!"

"Who are you working for?"

"Working for? No one! I'm unemployed. I'm in the middle of moving to Michigan, remember?!"

"Right, right, with a car that's still broken, right? Except that I know that it isn't. I saw Murphy yesterday while you were in the bathroom at the sub shop. He told me everything. You lied to me!"

"Is *that* what all of this is about?" she asked incredulously.

"That, this gun, and the telephone conversation I overheard you having yesterday morning. You were talking to a doctor. Doctor of what, Anne? Parapsychology perhaps? Is that how you've come to know what the use of barbiturates looks like? 'Cause you've seen them injected into test subjects before they undergo some kind of science experiment? You told this doctor you hadn't told me something yet and that it was hard keeping it from me. You also spoke of a complication you were dealing with but you'd be able to handle it and you'd report back in after a few days. What complication was that, Anne? The fact that you were sleeping with the guy you were supposed to monitor? Or kill?!" and he gestured to the gun on the table.

Her eyes widened. For a moment her face was flushed as she stared at him. He waited for her to start screaming at him, either denying his suspicions or surrendering in a fury, but the storm had to break. He wanted her anger to match his own.

Instead, something dissolved in her gaze. There was a strange contortion that appeared around her eyes, nose and mouth, a look that he couldn't decipher.

She slowly approached the table, pulled the chair opposite of his back, and carefully took her seat, the towel laid across her thighs. Her calmness made him uneasy. It made him angrier.

"The car was a ruse, right?" he continued as she stared up at him, sheet white, her hair soaking through her shirt. "Just a way to make sure you could stick around for a few days, needle me for information, like you tried to at O'Malley's! But I didn't give you any, did I? So what are you going to report back to your doctor friend, Anne? What are you gonna tell him?"

Her head started wagging back and forth.

"What kind of hell have you been through to make you like this?" It wasn't a question so much as a statement. She had spoken softly, emotion edging her voice. She sounded sorry for him.

He had enough.

Collapsing back into his chair, keeping his eyes on his cigarette, Hopper lowered his voice as he said,

"Here's what's gonna happen. I'm gonna call the station and have one of the guys come out here to pick you up and they're gonna bring you to your car and you're gonna get in it and go back to wherever you came from and tell whoever you're working for that you've got nothing on me and if he sends anyone else, I don't care how attractive, how young or old, I will kill them. Do you understand?"

A measured beat of time passed.

"Jim. Listen to me," she pleaded, "You've taken these three things and twisted them into some sort of paranoid delusion. I'm not who you're accusing me of being. I don't even understand half the stuff you're talking about." She was fighting the tears that sprang in her eyes and he finally recognized the change that had swept over her face, the look that he couldn't place. It was pain. He hadn't seen it on her before.

He felt his chest buckle as a wave of dread swept over him.

"Then how do you explain the phone call? And lying to me about your car? Having this gun?" he demanded, frantic.

"The gun belonged to my father. One of the few things he left behind when he took off on us. I'm a young woman driving across the

country for the first time and I'm alone. I brought it for protection.

"Yes, I was talking to a doctor on the phone, but it was my brother's doctor." She closed her eyes as if the pain was too bright for her to see. "Gilbert...isn't well. He was addicted to Amobarbital which is how I know what it looks like to be on barbiturates. He was diagnosed with Schizophrenia years ago after he attacked my mother with a kitchen knife and then turned on me and my sister when we tried to intervene. Since then he has been living in Auburn Hills Hospital, a psychiatric asylum in Marquette, Michigan and Dr. Stillwell has been his psychiatrist. After our mother died, I told Dr. Stillwell that I didn't want any of the staff to tell Gilbert about her death, that he needed to hear it from me, from family. What you heard was me telling him that I hadn't told my *brother* yet about mom's passing or that I was coming up to see him and that it was hard keeping it from *him*, it had nothing to do with you. And the complication you heard me speak of was having my car break down on the way."

The tears were falling freely as she spoke. Each drop seemed to course through his soul, cutting a bloodied path and salting the wound.

Crossing her arms over her chest, her hands hugging her shoulders, she continued,

"And as for my car, yes, I lied to you about it still being broken, because I wanted to stay longer. With you. I had been debating what to tell you as I walked to the station, and then the way you kissed me in your office... I didn't want to leave after that. So I lied and told you that it wasn't fixed so I could spend a few more days with you... because... I was falling for you."

She caught her breath, as if that last confession had spent all of the air in her lungs.

Hopper felt like his legs were made of lead and he had just been thrown into the middle of the ocean. The anger he had felt earlier now completely evaporated leaving him weak and empty. He heard her sigh and then sniff, wiping the tears that had streaked down her cheeks.

She stood up stiffly, like she had aged a hundred years. He watched her as she went to the telephone. He couldn't move, couldn't speak.

"Morning, Flo," she said without bothering to hide the sadness in her voice though she smiled into the receiver. "The Chief needs one of the guys to come out to his place and pick me up to take me to Murphy's. Can you-... No, he's fine, I just don't want him to do it. He's done enough already... Thanks, Flo. And since I won't be seeing you again, it was lovely to meet you... Aw, thank you... Yes, you, too... bye."

"She's sending Powell," Anne said as she hung up. Her head dropped back against the couch as if it suddenly weighed too much and she closed her eyes, her limbs splayed and loose. She looked like she could sleep for decades.

Hopper sat immobile at the table, still trying to process everything he had heard. He kept playing her words over in his mind, looking for holes, for any moments when she looked like she was lying, trying to cover something up. All he had was her word to go on. Was it enough?

So absorbed in his thoughts he didn't realize she had gotten up to get her things together, throw her towel and the sheets she used into the washing machine, and put her snowsuit on. When Powell appeared in front of his home, Hopper was still lifeless, a ruminating statue.

But she was suddenly beside him, her gloved hand on his shoulder feeling like she was touching someone else. He was watching her from far away it seemed, trying to distance himself from what was happening. He finally registered that she was talking to him.

"I'd have taken a polygraph test if I thought it'd help. But since I can't, I'm just asking you to believe one thing: that what I felt for you was real. That I care about you, Jim." She lowered her face and pushed a kiss on his cheek, a hush of strawberries lingered where her lips had been. "If you ever decide to trust that, come find me," she whispered as fresh tears spilled from her eyes.

He watched her go, crushed beneath the weight of paranoid indecision, his mind warring with itself as he listened to Powell's car pull away. A frost enveloped him, making him shudder. He lowered

his head onto his arms on the table and bit back the urge to scream.

He didn't know how much time had passed, only that when he pulled his head back up, his arms were tingling and his neck gripped in pain. A name stood out in his clouded mind.

Auburn Hills Hospital.

Pulling himself free from his chair with a groan, Hopper drifted to his phone. Dialing the operator, he asked to be connected to the Auburn Hills Hospital in Marquette, Michigan, then waited.

The ring was answered by a woman with a flat voice, the receptionist.

"Dr. Stillwell, please," Hopper said.

"One moment."

A few seconds later and,

"Dr. Stillwell."

Hopper swallowed the rock in his throat.

"I'm calling on behalf of Anne Garrett."

"Oh? Is she alright?" came a worried reply.

"So you know her?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"A friend... or I was. I-I don't know what I am to her now. I think... I think I've made a huge mistake." And Hopper dropped the receiver back onto the cradle as realization of what he'd done washed over him.

He slid to the floor, weak and cold.

She had told him the truth.

He had accused her of not only being a spy but that she was supposed

to kill him. His eyes darted to the table where her gun still lay. She didn't even take it with her.

"Oh, God!" he wailed, letting his head fall into his hands as his chest raged and tore.

She had sat there, so calmly, the pain streaked across her face as she listened to him yell at her, attacking her, charging her with crimes that only a lunatic could come up with. She would never forgive him. He would never forgive himself.

Instinctively his hand clasped over the bracelet on his wrist, conjuring up Sarah's face as she lay in the hospital. He was intentionally cutting himself on the ragged edges of her memory; feeling the pain was important as it meted out some form of punishment for what he had done.

After a time had passed, Hopper unsteadily climbed to his feet. His watch told him he was late for work. The idea of having to go in, to face Flo and Powell and the rest, it burned a hole through his stomach. But it needed to get done.

He stood in the shower longer than he should've, but the water provided some mild relief to the aching in his muscles. He dressed fairly quickly, got a cup of coffee, nuked it to a boiling point, and added a heavy shot of whiskey to it. He would have to call his doctor from the station about getting a refill of his prescription because he was in sore need of its magic.

The temperature had dropped dramatically from yesterday. His breath appeared like frozen vapor as he huffed it to the truck, trying not to spill the contents of his mug. Something had been itching at him, something he was trying to remember that Anne had said.

Getting into his cab, balancing his coffee carefully, Hopper closed the door behind him. He set the mug on the seat to insert the keys into the ignition. He turned the heat all the way up and on full blast.

He sat there for a few moments, reaching for the thought that seemed to be eluding him as he waited for his car to warm up even just a little. He was sure it was something she said right before she left, but

he had shut down almost completely by that point, her words were a jumbled mess in his brain.

He went to reach for his coffee, sure the caffeine would jumpstart his thoughts, but he clumsily knocked the cup over onto the seat, emptying the contents all over the upholstery.

It was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Unleashing a tirade of swears and curses, Hopper screamed as he beat his fist against the back of the passenger seat. He assaulted the cushion until he was heaving for breath, a dampness lining his forehead. As he sat there gasping, his eyes fixed on the passenger side window. A-N-N-E had reappeared, frosted onto the glass from the heat of the coffee and Hopper's exertions on the seat.

His breath caught in his throat.

She had told him she cared about him.

After everything he had done to her.

"If you ever decide to trust that, come find me."

As the emotion gurgled up from his gut, he gave a weak cough as it broke free from his chest and erupted into a short, thrumming sob. Throwing his car into drive, Hopper flew from his yard, turning on his flashers and siren as he sped out to Route 421.

She had left him about an hour and a half ago. Calculating the time it would take Powell to bring her to Murphy's and for her to leave the garage and be on her way, Hopper guessed she was well past his place, but still following the main road. The adrenaline pumping through him was making him shake, his heart jumping from his chest.

She cared about him.

How was that possible?

What he didn't find impossible was that he knew he cared for her, too.

He loved how easy her laugh came, her smile. Always ready with that smile of hers for him, for anyone. She was sunshine in his otherwise dreary, cold life, bringing with her happiness, positivity, and a light he had been missing since Sarah died. And the peace she instilled in him, the way she could make him relax, it was like she had a power over him, granting him a calmness when no other could. But it was her strength that Hopper marveled the most at. Dealing with her car, the Sunnyside Motel, his crabbiness, then his paranoia, his nightmare, his cold-shoulder, his accusations. She moved with it all, a graceful fortitude that blew him away. Anybody else would have crumbled under what she went through.

His heart was aching as he raced along the road, praying she hadn't decided to choose another way to get to Michigan or that she hadn't changed her mind.

"If you ever decide to trust that, come find me."

He would find her. If he had to drive all the way to Marquette, he would find her.

His chest nearly imploded when he caught sight of a single dark green car far ahead of him. Pressing the accelerator to the floor, Hopper raced to catch up to it, panting for air as if he were the one mobilizing his truck. The car was applying its breaks now, reacting to his wailing police horn and lights, pulling over though he was still quite far away. As he drew nearer, he could tell it was a Datsun and that the back window was filled up with stuff, then the out-of-state license plate. It was her.

Trembling, trying to breathe steadily, he stumbled from his Blazer. She jumped out of her car at the same time. He still felt like his body was made from iron as he tried to run to meet her, his lungs giving him no air to support his effort. But she was running to him, too, quicker, and she was in his arms before he could stop his momentum. They faltered slightly as she made impact, him leaning back into his car as he caught her force, their arms locked around each other as he heaved,

"I'm sorry, Annie! I'm so sorry!"

She was squeezing him with a power that surprised him, a desperation in the way her hands groped and grasped at his back. He pulled her away slightly to jam his mouth onto hers, their kiss mad with relief, joy. Adoration.

They were both breathless now, clinging to each other, the tears splashing from her eyes as she looked up at him with a blinding grin.

"You came after me," she puffed as he wiped the moisture from her cheeks. Her eyes were rimmed red, inflamed. She had been crying before he pulled her over. He gently brushed his lips across each of her eyelids, before finding her mouth again. He kissed her slow and deep, promising with each caress he would never make her cry again. A trucker sailed passed the embraced couple, issuing a celebratory blare of his air horn. Hopper felt her smile under his lips, but she didn't try to part from him.

When they were content to just half-stand, half-lean there against his Blazer, Anne bowing into him, her face pressed to his shirt, Hopper wished her honey hair wasn't restrained under her hood so he could feel its silky strands on his fingers.

"We gotta get you a new snowsuit," he chuckled against her head. She lifted herself away from him, a grim seriousness in her eyes that Hopper wasn't expecting.

"I-I'm still leaving, Jim."

"What?" He stood from the truck, his hands now holding onto her upper arms like she would fly from him any moment. "What are you talking about?"

"I have to see my brother. He needs me to tell him about mom."

"Okay, but afterward you'll come back, right?"

"Yes. I'll come back. But I don't know when."

"Soon though?"

"It depends. On how well you do without your pills."

The ground seemed to open up under him.

"Anne. I need those pills."

She nodded, grief coloring her face gray. She lifted her hand to his cheek, the fabric of her glove smoothing his skin.

"You'll have to decide what you'll need more then. The pills or me."

He stood there, a man lost at sea and his only anchor saying goodbye forever if he didn't give up the pills that helped him cope with the everyday.

"But you're leaving! If you stayed with me, then I could drop the Tuinal no problem, but without you here... I'm not sure I'm strong enough, Anne." His grip on her would've made her wince had she not been encased in her snowsuit.

"Jim-

"Anne, please, don't ask this of me, too." She dragged her upper lip into her mouth and chewed it, her eyes swimming again with fresh tears. He had already broken his promise that he mentally made to her and it had been less than ten minutes.

"Jim. If you care enough for me, then you'll find the strength to do it."

He shuddered, the enormity of what she was asking already pressing down on him. She stretched her face forward and found his lips, giving him a reminder of what she meant to him. He pulled her into his body, desperate to make the contact last, trying to show her how critical his need for her was. But instead of responding with the same heated passion, Anne only absorbed it, allowing his fire to scorch her until it finally waned and died.

He turned his face away, breathing hard. Setting his mouth into a tight line, he looked back down at her, anger welling up in the place of ardor.

"You're serious. You're really gonna do this to me?"

A cheerless smile pulled at the corners of her mouth as she took a couple of steps backwards.

"When you've decided that you need me more, write to Dr. Stillwell. He'll get me the message." And she turned around and jogged back to her car.

He waited until her Datsun disappeared over the hill before climbing back into his truck. The smell of coffee and alcohol greeted his nose and he looked at the mess on the seat with distaste. Gripping the steering wheel until his knuckles blanched, Hopper tore the Blazer around and headed back towards Hawkins.

He would do it, he decided. He would muster up whatever strength he had left inside him and he would give up his pills for Anne. Heck, he'll throw in the drinking, too, so that way she can't come back and say to him, no, now you gotta quit the boozing as well. It'll be hell for him for a very long time, he knew that.

But he'd certainly lived through worse. He knew that too. And at least this time...there was a blindingly beautiful light at the end of the tunnel.

13. EPILOGUE

A pan of onions sat cooking on the stove in olive oil while a pot of salted water simmered behind it, nearly ready for the corn on the cob. Anne was husking over the trash bin. She had the radio playing softly in the background and found herself humming along to Phil Collins as she finished cleaning off the last ear of corn.

Laying them on the counter beside the sink, she retrieved a stick of butter from the refrigerator to let soften. As she shut the door to the fridge, butter in her hand, her eyes fell on the simple, square piece of lined paper that was held to the freezer door by her favorite Garfield magnet. Like she did every time she saw it, Anne smiled as her eyes swept over the five words written across it in hasty, barely legible writing: I need you more - Jim.

Dr. Stillwell had handed it to her about a couple of months ago now, a question in his eyes. He had told her about the phone call he had received the day she left Indiana from an unnamed male asking if the doctor knew her and then the cryptic answer he gave when the doctor asked who was calling. Anne showered the note with kisses when she got it and confirmed that it was from the same strange caller. But as much as she wanted to drop everything and go roaring back to Hawkins, Anne hadn't been in the position to do so.

Uttering a light sigh, she turned back to the kitchen counter where her corn sat and, drawing a knife from the block, began cutting off the ends.

Her brother had taken the news of their mother passing as hard as she thought he would, needing to be placed on suicide watch almost immediately. But under Dr. Stillwell's care and with Anne's regular visits, Gilbert got well enough to be returned back to his normal ward and room. She almost didn't worry about him any more.

As Anne cut through the center of the first ear of corn, she was suddenly pressed against the counter from behind as one strong hand clamped across her mouth and another her wrist wielding the knife. The savage abruptness would've made her gasp in fear had her mouth been free from its restraint, but instead any cry or noise she could

issue was stifled. She was pinned, unable to move, by the body of a man who leaned down to flatten his cheek against her head so that his mouth came just behind her ear.

"Don't move," he commanded in a low, husky voice. Swallowing, heart thrumming like a butterfly's wings, Anne tried to squirm free, pulling at the fingers at her mouth with her free hand. But her writhing attempts only made the assailant push her harder into the counter and grip her wrist so tight she dropped the knife.

"I said... Don't. Move." And he tilted her head, bringing it back until it touched his shoulder. With a gentleness that matched the pressure he held her body at, he brushed a series of light kisses along the side of her neck, moving from the base of her ear down to her collarbone, never once letting his hold on her falter. Anne's heart rate increased as she pushed her rear back into him. A deep grunting chuckle bubbled up his throat.

"You play dirty," he rumbled into her neck as he guided her hand that had held the knife towards her side so that his arm was now wrapped around her middle. He gave her one last squeeze before pulling away just enough to spin her around sharply, locking her back against the counter so that she now faced him. She gave him as serious a look as she could muster before saying,

"I'd be running for the hills right now," then, looping her now freed hands around Hopper's neck to pull his face closer, "if I wasn't so turned on." She brought her lips to his and muscled a fiery kiss onto them. She felt more than heard his responding chortle. When his hands started migrating, she pushed him away with a rebuking noise and turned back to their cooking dinner.

"Go check on our steaks, Chief, I don't want mine burned to a crisp because you decide to get frisky." He gave her bottom a healthy slap before he did as he was told and returned to the back deck to man the grill. She smiled to herself as she finished halving the ears of corn and dropped them into the now boiling pot of water.

She'd been back in Hawkins now and living with her favorite Chief of Police for a little less than a month, coming in at the start of June. She hadn't told him she was coming, just showed up at his door and

waited for him to get home from work, sitting on his steps trying to read *A Farewell to Arms*. They hadn't communicated at all since she left him on the side of the road that day, except for the note he sent by way of Dr. Stillwell. It had been six months since they'd seen each other and she was not just a little afraid of his reaction to finding her there.

His truck pulled in and she stood from her seat, nervously stuffing her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. He got out, an unreadable look on his face, as he kept his gaze fixed on her and unhurriedly approached her, his hat in his hands. He stopped when he got to be a few feet away.

"I got your note," she said nervously, producing the paper as proof.

"What took you so long?" he grumbled complainingly. She grinned at him and stepped closer.

"Well, I'm here now. So are you gonna be a big baby about it or are you gonna give me a proper welcome?"

He dashed forward before she could barely finish her sentence and swept her up in his arms, giving her a kiss that charged her body. Her proper welcome soon followed.

When the onions were done and the corn had finished cooking, Hopper helped carry them out to the little card table they had set up for their meal and they sat down to enjoy the food they both prepared. As they ate, she'd occasionally reach over while he was talking and brush her palm over his shoulder or he would cover her hand with his giving it a squeeze, little gestures that meant so much to them after being apart for so many months. Flo called it their honeymoon phase, but never in front of them.

As the sun descended beyond the trees on his property, they stood up and leaned against the railing, backs to the pond, to watch the colors that painted the sky in warm hues. With the encroaching darkness, the early summer air grew brisk and Hopper pulled her against him, crossing his arms over her chest and leaning his chin against her head. She happily melted into him, enjoying the comfort of having him against her.

"This is how I pictured it," he suddenly murmured. She shifted her head to the side so she could look up at him.

"Pictured what?"

He gave a shrug.

"Us. Standing here on the deck like this, watching the sky change colors, just enjoying the moment."

"It's a good moment, isn't it?" she smiled, returning her head under his chin.

"No," he replied, then tightened his hold around her, "It's perfect."